

Decentralizing Disasters

Civic Engagement and Stalled Reconstruction after Japan's 3/11

BRIDGET LOVE

What is this earthquake trying to teach us? If there is nothing it is trying to teach us, then what can we possibly have left to believe?
Wagō Ryōichi 2011

After threading through miles of ruins, a mini-bus deposited our group in the parking lot of an incongruously named *bōsai sentā* (disaster prevention center). It stood in front of us, a battered and windowless two-story building. A lone bulldozer toiled in the rubble behind it. There were few other orienting points in sight. The remains of concrete foundations left by Japan's March 11, 2011, tsunami poked up jaggedly from the ground for miles in every direction. As we waited for a local guide to arrive and give us a tour of the center, members of our group wandered the parking lot snapping pictures of tiled bathrooms open to the sky, hardy clover flowering in piles of debris, and other curiosities in the ruins.

We were volunteers returning from a day spent building a community garden for tsunami survivors from this district of Kamaishi City. In 2013 they were still living in temporary housing enclaves wedged between nearby mountains. Rebuilding had yet to begin in Kamaishi, as in dozens of coastal municipalities along Japan's northeastern Pacific coast, even though *fukkō* (reconstruction) was a constant topic of discussion in the national news. This contradiction invariably surprised volunteers visiting the disaster site for the first time. Reflecting on our outing at a debriefing meeting later that evening, a young man from Tokyo marveled, "It's been two years, but nothing has changed."

Of course, this was not entirely true. According to Japan's Reconstruction Agency, over 18 million tons of debris were collected, sorted, and removed from the coast in the first year after the disaster (Fukkō chō 2012,

2).¹ Yet rubble is just one of massive challenges caused by the magnitude 9.0 earthquake that struck off the eastern coast of Tōhoku, the six-prefecture region comprising the northeast of Japan's main island. Triggered by the quake, mega-tsunami rising to heights of forty meters inundated three hundred miles of coastline. They killed nearly twenty thousand people before triggering a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Dai-ichi power plant in southern Tōhoku. This chain of disasters, referred to as 3/11 in Japan, produced vast and far-reaching effects. Five hundred thousand coastal residents were displaced from their homes. Radiation permeated Japan's domestic food system and has streamed into the Pacific in unknown quantity. Even as government teams work to decontaminate municipalities in the fallout plume of the Fukushima plant, advocacy groups have measured radiation hotspots in playgrounds one hundred and fifty miles south in Tokyo. Equidistant from the plant to the north, survivors in Kamaishi still waited two years later as plans to rebuild their communities lagged in deliberations.

During this time, Japanese politicians, pundits, and academics have been quick to glean crisp lessons from the sprawling tragedies. Just days after the earthquake, Tokyo's governor, Ishihara Shintaro, called the tsunami "a divine punishment" meant to "wash away the selfish-egoism" and "materialism" that has come to infuse Japan's national identity ("Daishin-sai wa tenbatsu" 2011). Critics quickly condemned his comments as absurd and insensitive. However, his was just one of many voices seeking to distill the vast disasters into pointed commentary on the legacies of Japan's high-speed economic growth. Tourism policy expert Inoue Kenji observed that the tsunami abruptly destroyed the illusion that Japan's relative affluence can ensure the security and well-being of its population. He explained, "We realized that a society premised on constant growth through the pursuit of material wealth and mass consumption can't be permanent. What is real prosperity? What is happiness? We need to rebuild, but first re-imagine our values and way of living" (Inoue 2011, 5).²

Domestically, the triple disasters prompted many Japanese to recognize the unequally shared costs of Japan's affluence. In their wake, Tōhoku came into view as an aged and economically vulnerable region that had been exploited to support the priorities of Japan's center. Having provided natural resources to support the nation's industrialization and military expansion, then labor to fuel Japan's postwar economic growth, Tōhoku became an ideal site for generating nuclear power to serve Tokyo's consumer needs. Highlighting this extractive relationship, 3/11 spurred a mood of critical reflection in Tokyo. Much of it has been directed toward the failings of the highly centralized system of governance that structured Japan's postwar economic recovery and high-speed growth. After two

“lost decades” of persisting recession, many argue that this centralized system has outlived its efficacy in an increasingly fast-paced and volatile global economy. In this self-reflexive climate, reconstruction has assumed significance as an opportunity to usher in changes that will forge a more resilient nation and reset Japan’s global standing.

Such realizations have bolstered an ongoing shift toward decentralization, implemented in the early 2000s through a series of structural reforms by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichiro to update the nation’s political economy. Part of a concerted neoliberal agenda, decentralization aims to streamline Japan’s central government by demanding greater fiscal and administrative autonomy of its rural regions. Proponents of such reforms have seized on the disasters as evidence of the vulnerabilities inherent in Japan’s centralized energy industry, food systems, and public works juggernaut. In turn, they envision reconstruction as an opportunity to pursue more intensive structural reforms, under which Tōhoku would become one of several autonomous but competitive regional blocks within a decentered nation. Economist Fujita Masahisa (2011) thus refers to the disasters as a “creative destruction” that will spark the building of a more resilient and innovative Japan. Yet his logic differs from that motivating more virulent strains of “disaster capitalism” (Klein 2007) that exploit the chaotic aftermath of catastrophe as cover for implementing aggressive neoliberal reforms. Many post-disaster decentralization supporters argue that the catastrophes revealed latent civic energies, cultural resources, and environmental vulnerabilities suppressed within Japan’s highly centralized political economy. They frame their visions of post-3/11 reconstruction in terms of progressive goals of national inclusion, cultural diversity, and ecological resilience.

In this chapter I critically examine hopeful expectations that reconstruction might spark needed social and political change in Japan. Assessing the stagnant progress of coastal reconstruction, I argue that the revelatory insights sparked by the 3/11 disasters have failed to clarify the mechanisms through which decentralization might produce a more resilient nation. Two years later, Kamaishi’s survivors still waited for the outlines of a rebuilding plan to take shape. Even as they were appropriated as national symbols of community self-reliance, they increasingly feared the possibility of their own municipal recovery slipping beyond their grasp. Attempting to bypass this stalemate, relief volunteers, who continue to trek to Kamaishi and other sites in Tōhoku, concentrated on microrenewal initiatives to help build morale and relationships among survivors. This chapter draws on fieldwork with volunteer groups in Kamaishi in 2011 and 2013, and builds on a decade of prior research in Tōhoku. It shows that the decentered model of reconstruction following 3/11 promotes ad hoc

and small-scale relief and rebuilding efforts that reproduce, rather than resolve, regional inequalities.

The prolonged recovery period endured by Kamaishi's residents is a common outcome of catastrophes. Vincanne Adams is among medical anthropologists (Adams et al. 2011, 248) who characterize disasters as "chronic in nature." In their study of the long-term health impacts of Hurricane Katrina, Adams and her colleagues contend that as "disasters themselves 'age,'" they often produce lasting political inaction and "relentless long-term debility" (2011, 249). Their work builds on anthropological scholarship that considers disasters "from the perspective of a long-term continuum" (Button 2010, 248; see also Oliver-Smith 1996, 312). For disaster anthropologists, this corrects a popular misconception of disasters as isolated events—which in turn contributes to shortsighted visions of recovery. Here, I assess the debility and inaction emerging in the wake of 3/11 as an unexpected outcome in Japan, given collective hopes that the disasters would unleash change. Consistent with a shift toward decentralization, I show that the burden of these unrealized hopes has been transferred over time onto victims of the disasters in Japan's northeast. As decentralization becomes a global trend of governance, this chapter raises important questions about the growing vulnerability of communities in a global era marked by intensifying natural catastrophes and economic volatility, but devolving risks and responsibilities.

Reconstruction Doldrums

News coverage of post-disaster Tōhoku has frequently attributed delays in coastal recovery to local disagreements over how to rebuild devastated communities. When our guide Tanaka-san arrived at Kamaishi's disaster prevention center, he explained to us that the battered building was at the center of one such conflict. Nearly two hundred nearby residents took refuge inside the center on March 11, 2011, only to drown when tsunami waters inundated the two-story building. While some local survivors wanted the structure retained as a memorial, others dreaded the prospect of encountering a graphic reminder of their tragedy on a daily basis. An energetic elderly farmer, Tanaka-san parsed this debate for us before detailing the prefecture's plans to rebuild the district atop a secure ten-meter elevation. As we surveyed the ruins, it was difficult to imagine such a feat—even more so since Tanaka-san was not optimistic about its execution. He warned of enormous shortages in the expertise and labor needed to initiate such massive earthworks projects simultaneously in dozens of municipalities up and down Tōhoku's coast. The cause of the

expected delays was not fiscal. When Prime Minister Abe took power in 2012 after a rapid succession of leaders from the center-left Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), his conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) committed to increase reconstruction funding to \$25 billion over the next five years (Oguma 2013). Even so, during the first year money allocated for reconstruction was returned unspent to government coffers because municipalities were unable to mobilize needed workers or materials (Borov and Tsubuku 2013).

As he lamented this deadlock in a thick northeastern dialect, Tanaka-san was prone to cheerful digressions—including a story about his pumpkins. It illustrated how, in the midst of systemic stalemates, many survivors took solace in projects symbolic of proactive, local forms of intervention. On his upland farm, Tanaka-san was cultivating heirloom pumpkins with seeds evacuated from Iitate, a city in the fallout plume of the Fukushima plant. Forced from their contaminated land, Iitate's farmers called on colleagues in other prefectures to maintain their distinctive local pumpkin variety. In rescuing the seeds to grow in Kamaishi and telling the story to our group while standing in a vast scene of tsunami wreckage, Tanaka-san was making a small but optimistic gesture in the midst of a situation mired in a massive structural quagmire. Nearby, local tsunami survivors remained housed indefinitely in rows of prefab housing units crowded onto narrow terraces of land. When they were moved into temporary housing months after the disaster, all Tōhoku evacuees were given a deadline of two years to relocate into permanent homes. Two years later in Kamaishi, basic plans about how to safeguard the city against future tsunamis still had to be finalized and approved before rebuilding could start. The situation was the same up and down the coast. On the eve of the second anniversary of the disaster, the national newspaper *Asahi shimbun* reported that only 15 percent of Japan's 270,000 evacuees had permanently relocated. Summing up the dilemma of Kamaishi's displaced families, Tanaka-san explained, "They can't see a way forward."

Indeed, there was increasing concern among officials about the psychological toll of such prolonged uncertainty on evacuees. Many predict that suicide rates will rise as the situation drags on without resolution. A study by the National Institute for Research Advancement (*Sōgō kenkyū kaihatsu kikō* 2013) highlighted hardships endured by survivors during their second year of displacement in temporary housing. Hardships were especially pronounced in Iwate Prefecture, the northernmost of the hardest-hit prefectures, where progress toward reconstruction particularly lagged in municipalities like Kamaishi. The study found that women remain socially isolated without adequate child care or job options. It noted that elderly living alone in temporary housing are under significant emotional

stress. They have been left behind in disproportionately high numbers as young families, eager to settle into new jobs and schools, begin relocating to start their lives elsewhere. Several relief volunteers that I spoke with commented that many elderly expect to live out the remainder of their days in temporary housing. Indeed, figures released by Japan's Reconstruction Agency suggest that delays have begun to endanger prospects for municipal rebuilding. In Kamaishi alone, there has been a 30 percent drop in the number of displaced families intending to rebuild their homes in the city. Commenting on these falling numbers, Iwate University agricultural scientist Hirota Jun'ichi urged officials to speed up the reconstruction process. He noted, "The longer decisions about relocation sites and land reclamation are delayed, more and more disaster victims will give up on rebuilding their homes" ("Hisaisha: jitaku saiken kōtai" 2014).

At the same time, such dismal predictions have not dampened the futuristic inflection of national rhetoric surrounding the rebuilding of Tōhoku's devastated regions. On the third anniversary of the disaster, Prime Minister Abe (Sōri kantei 2014) acknowledged the sluggish pace of post-disaster recovery, even as he reassured the nation: "I am determined that this coming year will be one in which the people of the devastated regions actually perceive reconstruction." Befitting this promise, the term "*fukkō*" (reconstruction) evokes the active and materially tangible work of rebuilding. Yet in the context of Abe's larger comments, its purpose is not just the restoration of well-being to affected communities. Rather, as he continued, "We must make [the 2020 Tokyo Olympics] an opportunity to demonstrate to the world that Tōhoku has achieved reconstruction." On an international stage, Japan's handling of the disaster has been seized upon as an opportunity for its government to model the kind of national resolve needed to restore a global status dimmed by decades of economic malaise. Likewise, the disaster has been appropriated in other forums as an occasion to translate Japan's downturns into global leadership in the arena of sustainable development. At the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Japan presented its Future City Initiative, a set of urban design models showcasing principles of low-carbon building, recycling, health care, and disaster preparedness (United Nations 2012). Kamaishi was selected as one of several model cities in this initiative, since its reconstruction offered an opportunity to highlight innovative urban planning that promotes disaster resilience, elder-friendly communities, and environmentally sound construction.

Plans to promote the city as a global model of sustainability overlook the extent to which predisaster Kamaishi grappled with concerns about its future. During Japan's nineteenth-century industrialization and twentieth-century colonial expansion in Asia, the city prospered as a center of steel

mining and metal works. Though its postwar population peaked at around 90,000 residents, falling global metal prices meant the downsizing of the city's iron works and the closing of its mines. For the past half-century, the city has experienced steady demographic and economic decline. By the time of the 2011 disasters, the city's population had fallen to just under 38,000 residents, nearly one-third of whom were over sixty-five years of age.³ Pre-3/11 Kamaishi was like many cities and towns in Tōhoku—in the throes of radical decline, and without expectations of future growth. The city is one apt example of why officials have adopted reconstruction as their post-disaster benchmark, rather than the related goal of *fukkyū* (recovery), which connotes the return to a previous state.

Indeed, Kamaishi's vulnerability prior to the disaster was intensified by a decade of neoliberal reforms. Designed to promote greater municipal autonomy by streamlining Japan's centralized government, neoliberal decentralization policies have largely entailed measures to reduce state funding to the nation's rural regions. In doing so, they have reversed a redistributive tax system that for decades transferred taxes collected in Japan's populous urban centers to shore up the municipal budgets of its flagging countryside. Proponents of such reforms assume that funding withdrawals will force Japan's municipalities to more effectively and responsibly manage their existing assets. In fact, many frame decentralization as a return to grassroots forms of local democratic governance—a way, according to DPJ politician Katayama Yoshihiro, “for residents to decide regional matters themselves” (Takenaka 2013). Despite such ideals, many rural localities, economically depleted and with large aging populations dependent on social welfare services, struggle to manage their needs on less and less government support.

It is in this context that that fascination with the idea of community self-sufficiency in Tōhoku blossomed after the 3/11 disasters. Mainstream media outlets quickly honed in on themes of communal resilience in their coverage of the tsunami aftermath. Stories of the collective strength and self-control of tsunami survivors—as they organized themselves in makeshift evacuation centers and peaceably shared scant resources—became staples of disaster reporting. The international press seized on such stories as examples of how traditional Japanese values of restraint and *gaman* (perseverance) patterned an orderly civic response to the disaster. In contrast, within Japan such traits are strongly associated with Tōhoku's rural communities, long viewed as repositories of traditions that have faded in prosperous, urban Japan. According to this logic, the history of famine and deprivation endured by Tōhoku's communities, within their rugged terrain and harsh winter climate, has produced a collective spirit of perseverance. As Jennifer Robertson (2011, 122) has critically noted, in

the wake of 3/11 celebrations of Tōhoku's culture displaced anger over an inadequate governmental response that abandoned vulnerable disaster victims to their own devices.

Indeed, the most common expressions of solidarity with tsunami survivors consist of calls for Tōhoku's victims to continue to persevere. As one example, Japan's Ministry of the Interior sought to drum up emotional support for the devastated communities by encouraging groups to endorse the slogan "Gambaru Tōhoku" [you can do it, Tōhoku]. A March 2011 Ministry memo explained, "As time passes after the earthquake and tsunami, a forward-looking energy is starting to return to victims of the disaster. In support, we've begun an initiative to send to the Tōhoku region the message 'You can do it Tōhoku.' ... It's meant to deliver hope to the hearts of Tōhoku's people who met with suffering in the disaster" (Kokudokōtsu sho 2011). The announcement contained a roster of academic, governmental, and business groups endorsing the initiative, as well as links to download "Gambaru Tōhoku" banners in various sizes for printing onto fliers and stickers. In the months after the disaster, such signage became ubiquitous throughout Japan. It was indicative of the tone of cheerful encouragement that has also permeated policy and academic responses to the disaster from within Tokyo.⁴ Rooted in earnest optimism that the disaster-stricken regions will overcome their devastation, these responses from the center lack specific recommendations about how Tōhoku might translate its indigenous character into a vital regional future. Instead, Gambaru Tōhoku—in conjunction with the post-disaster slogan Gambaru Nippon (we can do it, Japan)—transformed the devastated region into a beacon of inspiration for Japan to rally strength and solidarity after two lost decades of stagnant economic growth and diminished global standing.

Disaster and Decentralization

In Japan as elsewhere, decentralization displaces administrative functions and fiscal responsibilities of the state onto local government or civic and private entities. Because it is often driven by an impulse to free up markets from excessive oversight, geographers Rodriguez-Pose and Nicholas Gill (2003, 37) refer to decentralization as a devolutionary trend sweeping the world in relation to aggressive forms of neoliberal capitalism. It requires self-responsible citizens and self-sufficient communities that can maintain themselves with limited state support. The events of 3/11 revealed ambivalent public perceptions of these devolutions in Japan. On the one hand, the disasters proved an opportunity to recognize new sources of

agency and energy in Japanese society. For many social commentators, volunteer relief workers represented the potentials latent in Japan's civic sphere. On the other hand, the disasters highlighted the limits of community self-sufficiency. Volunteers have been among those most critical of calls encouraging disaster victims and their communities to persevere in the aftermath of the tsunami. The nonprofit organization that facilitated my visit to Kamaishi's disaster prevention center addressed this problem in a lengthy flier outlining its guidelines for new volunteers. It included the following advice: "When we don't know what to say, we automatically use words like 'gambatte' (you can do it) and 'gambarō' (let's keep trying). But try to use them as little as possible. There are times when people have no idea how to 'keep trying.'"

To illustrate the scope of losses experienced by victims, the organization took volunteers on mini-tours through the disaster zones. It was on one such trip that we followed Tanaka-san through the Disaster Prevention Center, where a makeshift shrine spanned one wall of the center's first floor. It was laden with Buddhist statuary and offerings of incense, canned drinks, flowers, and toys to comfort the spirits of the deceased. Almost two hundred residents, including children from a nearby preschool, took refuge in a cavernous room on the second floor following the 3/11 earthquake. They were following the protocol of a recent neighborhood drill during which residents had practiced assembling at the center. In a tragic oversight, the drill's organizers failed to clarify that the building was not intended for tsunami evacuation.⁵ Residents seeking refuge there were caught unaware when water inundated both floors of the building. Of those inside who survived this deluge, a few clung to speakers and curtains mounted on the ceiling of the second floor. The rest were drawn out to sea as the water receded in the late afternoon. As we made our way through the center, Tanaka-san advised us not to linger around stairwells, closets, or other dark, enclosed spaces where bodies had been trapped. He explained that they were likely to be occupied by unsettled spirits that can influence and even possess the living who encounter them.⁶ The enduring presence of such spirits within tsunami-devastated communities remains a highly localized effect of the tsunami, long lasting and difficult to resolve through proactive initiative.

In public forums, politicians and activists have worked to derive tidier and more-transportable lessons from the disaster. These often center on themes of collective resilience and personal agency, both highly suited to mandates of decentralized governance. In Kamaishi, the roof of the disaster prevention center overlooks the site of two former junior high and elementary schools. In contrast to the tragic losses at the center, all

six hundred students from these schools survived the tsunami by fleeing upland after the earthquake. As the story goes, older students took younger students by the hand as they ascended the road to the schools' designated evacuation site. They then decided to climb higher, a decision that ultimately saved both students and the residents who followed their example. Dubbed *Kamaishi no kiseki* (the miracle of Kamaishi) in the media, the students' actions have garnered nationwide publicity. The Web site of Japan's Public Relations Office features their story under its post-3/11 banner "Made in the New Japan" as an example of the spirit that Japan needs to forge a comprehensive recovery—both from the disasters and the nation's sustained downturns (Japan Public Relations Office 2013). According to the article, the students prefer to call the event *Kamaishi no jisseki* (the achievement of Kamaishi) to emphasize the role that preparation and self-responsibility played in their survival.

Among the many contexts in which it has been invoked, Iwate's former governor Masuda Hiroya cited the "miracle of Kamaishi" in a 2011 keynote speech at a conference on regional decentralization. For him, the students' actions reinforced the importance of self-motivated agency in twenty-first century Japan. They have been widely praised for their impromptu decision not to sacrifice their own lives by stopping to help the elderly they encountered along their route. His speech juxtaposed the students' agility and self-motivated resolve with the bulky system of centralized governance that worsened the impacts of the disaster. It included a costly centralized engineering and public works juggernaut of seawalls that failed to protect coastal citizens from the tsunami, as well as national supply chains and energy systems instantly disrupted by the disasters (Masuda 2011). In contrast to these, he evoked Kamaishi's "miracle" as a heartening parable about the efficacy of local initiative and flexibility.

Motivated and mobile volunteers have also played a visible role in post-3/11 relief and recovery. Figures collected by coastal volunteer centers show that nearly 1 million volunteers poured into Tōhoku's tsunami-devastated regions to provide relief to victims in the first year after the disaster.⁷ Most worked on the coasts of Miyagai and Iwate Prefectures north of Fukushima Prefecture, where fear of radiation exposure inhibited volunteering. Volunteers cleared rubble, shoveled mud, washed photographs, distributed donations, and otherwise busied themselves with tasks that could be accomplished in the midst of the immense devastation. In turn, the outpouring of volunteers took many Japanese by surprise. The term "*muen shakai*" (disconnected society) has become a buzzword in recessionary Japan, summing up concerns that eroding familial support, job instability, and social isolation have come to pervade the character of

national life (Allison 2013). In contrast, the outpouring of volunteers was widely interpreted as an expression of latent forms of social connectedness that many feared had eroded in pre-3/11 Japan.

Yet it is important to note that Japan's volunteer movement was not a purely spontaneous emergence, but also the outcome of over a decade of political reform. It was shaped by policy initiatives to foster greater civic engagement from Japan's citizens so that its central government might retreat from so-called soft arenas of governance, including community building, social welfare, and environmental issues. The potential of volunteers was recognized as a resource to this end after the 1995 Kobe earthquake, a magnitude 7 trembler that killed over six thousand of the city's residents. Amid a sluggish official response, volunteers mobilized to rescue trapped victims, coordinate relief services, and clear debris in Kobe. Acknowledging the potential of volunteer activity, Japan's government quickly issued legislation to promote the expansion of its nonprofit sector in 1998.⁸ Such moves parallel similar efforts in other national contexts to cultivate active volunteer and nonprofit arenas as states externalize their welfare functions (see Muhlenberg 2012; Paley 2001). In fact, Japan's disaster volunteer movement was interpreted by some as evidence of the government's reticence to provide timely aid to its most vulnerable margins. In a newspaper profile two months after the tsunami, an American-born resident of Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture equated the presence of volunteers with the abandonment of the region. He reasoned, "People in Tōhoku can persevere. But, to me, it's manifesting in a negative way. More people need to be angry with the government, and ask 'Why do you prioritize [Japan's] cities? Why aren't you acting?'" (Yamaguchi 2011). He is among many who suspect that Tōhoku's peripheral status played a role in the state's slow response to the tsunami. In this sense, he observed, the disaster has revealed the politically significant slippage between *gaman* (perseverance) and "enduring problems forced on you."

Still others have considered the proactive civic response to the Tōhoku's disaster a vital step in building a more inclusive nation and self-actualized citizenry. Commenting on the volunteer relief effort, social welfare expert Yamasaki Mikiko asserted, "If we don't do this, there is no hope. Every single citizen who participates is weaving hope" (Yamasaki 2011, 36). Rather than a sign of regional abandonment, she envisions that 3/11 volunteerism has boosted awareness of the value of Japan's regions in Tokyo-centric Japan. She continued, "It's always said that the regions are important... Each region has its own lifestyle and culture. But [through volunteering] everyone experiences this personally. So the experience of volunteering becomes reality within each person. It doesn't just pass away, but becomes an inspiration in the way they live, something that cultivates

them as citizens” (Yamasaki 2011, 36). She argues that in allowing many Japanese to experience Tōhoku for the first time under the auspices of providing relief, volunteering has helped them form a sense of their own agency as citizens within a diverse and inclusive nation.

In a broader sense, the disasters sparked the recognition of what sociologist Yamashita Yūsuke (2012, 20) calls “a gap in awareness between Tokyo and Tōhoku.” This gap is a product of the structural inequalities that displaced the costs of Tokyo’s rapacious energy needs onto Tōhoku. The nature of this relationship is a concern of intellectual historian Akasaka Norio, who has long advocated for the recognition of Tōhoku’s distinctive cultural identity and historical role within Japan. In a high-profile editorial published in *Asahi shimbun* on the second anniversary of 3/11, Akasaka, a governmental adviser on reconstruction, posed the provocative question, “Is Tōhoku still a colony?” His question drew attention to an extractive history during which Tōhoku’s population, resources, and economic vitality were drained to fuel the priorities of Japan’s center. In the wake of the disaster, Akasaka asserted that the region still remains bound to Tokyo in a “periphery to core” relationship that “completely conceals Tōhoku.” To end this subordination, he and many commentators have proposed that Tōhoku transform its abundant natural resources of wind, forests, and waves into a self-sufficient, renewable energy system (Akasaka and Oguma 2012, 312). They contend that such plans would foster regional autonomy and self-direction, allowing Tōhoku to devise its own future development priorities.

The logistics of this transformation remain unclear, especially in the wake of the disasters, though an array of popular commentary celebrates the capacity of Tōhoku’s devastated communities to rally. Economist and public intellectual Genda Yuji recalls that when he visited Kamaishi after the disaster, he was shocked both at the level of devastation, and at how “bright and forward-looking” the residents he encountered were in their resolve to “definitely rebuild” (2011, 16). Interviewed as an official adviser on Tōhoku’s reconstruction, he cited the city’s history—its experience overcoming “hardship and setbacks” (2011, 16)—as an explanation for this resolve and as a resource for residents to draw from. Genda has invested a great deal in understanding Kamaishi’s municipal disposition. As part of a *kibōgaku* (Hopology) initiative spearheaded by Japan’s prestigious Tokyo University in the early 2000s, he was among an interdisciplinary group of scholars who adopted Kamaishi as a case study for exploring the existence of hope in recessionary Japan. In their three-volume set of findings, Genda suggested that the group selected the city as a field site because it is an unlikely place to look for hope. He noted that Japan’s center-driven quest for economic growth and efficiency have destroyed Kamaishi’s economy

and propelled radical outmigration. For these reasons, Genda explained, “You’d think that this would be a region that’s lost its hope” (2009, 279). Yet he and his colleagues (2009, 278) found that, despite being “in circumstances in which it’s difficult to believe that [hope] can be realized,” Kamaishi’s residents do have hope for the future.

Their findings that hope can exist even in bleak circumstances were well received in recessionary Japan, mired in stagnant economic growth, falling birthrates, and an aging population. More so, because the hope that Genda and his colleagues discovered in pre-3/11 Kamaishi was not a vague inclination of better times ahead, but an actionable impulse—“a wish for something to come true through action.” As Genda clarifies, “hope without any possibility of realization does not produce well-being. It’s the same as not having hope” (2009, 278).⁹ Equally important was their finding that it is within social relationships that hope flourishes as a productive force. In Kamaishi they concluded that while isolation and loneliness dull people’s capacity for hope, residents’ sense of attachment to their homes and community compel them to take action toward realizing a better future (Genda 2011, 17). In post-disaster Japan, Tōhoku’s communities have been celebrated for the durability of their ancestral culture and social bonds—qualities that activists, academics, and politicians expect will propel coastal reconstruction and rejuvenate Japan.

Recovery Work

Official visions of reconstruction assert a cheerful certainty about the future of Japan’s tsunami-devastated margins. A report by Japan’s Reconstruction Agency promised, “Reconstruction will not just restore [Tōhoku] to its original condition. It is an opportunity to solve problems that grip Japan as a nation, including population decline, aging, and the hollowing out of industries. In building a ‘New Tōhoku,’ we will model for the nation and world ‘a future society with creativity and potential’” (Fukkō chō 2013). In framing the disaster as an opportunity for bold action, the agency channels the assertive vision of Prime Minister Abe. An LDP neo-conservative, Abe has cast the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as an event that will showcase the success of Abenomics, a stimulus and spending package launched in 2013 to jolt Japan out of its recessionary malaise. Internationally, Abe has created waves by advocating for the revision of Article Nine of Japan’s constitution, which prevents its military from engaging in nondefensive operations. This move, along with official statements downplaying Japan’s historical responsibility for the sexual abuse of so-called comfort women by its wartime Imperial forces, has raised concern in Asia and beyond. In-

deed, Abe's unapologetic stance has extended to efforts—supported by neo-nationalists, but opposed by a coalition of anti-nuclear activists—not only to restart domestic reactors following the Fukushima meltdown, but also to export Japan's nuclear know-how to Central and South Asia.¹⁰ The disaster has been appropriated within an aggressive program to marshal domestic strength and relaunch Japan's global status.

Domestically, the mechanisms through which this bold agenda might restore well-being to the tsunami-ravaged coast remain unclear. The success of Japan's bid to host the upcoming Olympics was greeted with joyous fanfare in many sectors. However, critics quickly raised concerns that the building of Olympic infrastructure in Tokyo will draw needed resources away from Tōhoku's rebuilding. It will also deflect attention from ongoing struggles to contain the meltdown of the still-precarious Fukushima power plant. In fact, it is citizens who assumed new risks and responsibilities in post-3/11 Japan. An opaque government response to the Fukushima meltdown left everyday people, armed with scant information, to calculate the dangers they might face from nuclear exposure. Likewise, as Japan's bureaucracy struggled to respond to the disasters, a groundswell of volunteers flocked to Tōhoku's coast to assist victims in the weeks and months after 3/11. Their efforts have been celebrated as evidence of latent civic energies that will speed the nation's recovery from 3/11.

They also reflect an ad hoc response to the disasters that—addressing wide-scale destruction through small-scale and local engagements—mirrors the devolutionary framework of decentralization. When I first traveled to Iwate's post-tsunami coast in June 2011, I did so on a plush, private tour bus deployed by the prefectural government from Iwate's capital of Morioka. It carried a group of volunteers from all over Japan who signed up by following links on Iwate's prefectural Web site to a travel agency donating its resources for relief efforts. Our group emerged from the bus two hours later in a rubble-strewn rice paddy, where we spent the day cleaning out irrigation channels clogged with oily sludge and debris. Such work—dirty, strenuous, and focused on righting small patches within a vast scene of devastation—comprised much of what volunteers did on the coast during the first half-year following the tsunami. Japan's media coverage of their work emphasized buzzwords like *kibō* (hope) and *kizuna* (bonds) to reframe tragedy on the nation's margins as an experience that reconnects Japanese in bonds of shared resolve.

Still, ambiguities persist about the long-term roles of the state and civil society in coastal reconstruction. As volunteer with the nonprofit organization Magokoro Netto in 2011, I joined clean-up crews removing mud and debris from districts of Kamaishi. Two years later, when I returned to volunteer again, the organization had redefined their mission to that of

providing *pasoneru sapotto* (personal support) to survivors in the midst of stalled rebuilding. This time, I joined fellow volunteers creating recreational sites for evacuees in temporary housing. These sites included a community garden just north of Kamaishi where elderly women from nearby housing units tended small plots of vegetables. In the early summer of 2013 I worked on a crew cutting grasses and weeding the perimeter of the garden plots. We turned over an adjacent field with pick-axes to plant sweet potatoes in long raised furrows; students from a preschool across the road would harvest them during the fall harvest festival.

During a break one day, our supervisor and driver Yamaguchi-san gestured toward a nearby settlement of temporary housing units as he explained the need for the gardens: “People are anxious and aren’t leaving their temporary housing; they’re shutting themselves in. We want to make a place they can come when they want to leave, to relax and talk.” A single man in his late thirties, Yamaguchi-san had come to Tōhoku as a volunteer soon after the tsunami and stayed on to work for Magokoro Netto. He oversaw an herb and wildflower garden adjacent to another temporary housing enclave in Kamaishi. The organization hoped that elderly evacuees would eventually assume greater responsibility for the gardens, roles that staff contended would boost their morale and outlook on the future. In the meantime, volunteers weeded and watered them, hauling buckets from nearby irrigation channels to keep them alive.

Volunteers embraced such strenuous work as a temporary alternative to conventional career and life paths that are increasingly scarce and insecure in recessionary Japan. Many were long-term visitors at Magokoro Netto who boarded at the center in communal dorm rooms equipped with donated bedding for as long as they could afford to feed and clothe themselves. One young man was on a gap year before starting university. A woman in her thirties had a lucrative job as a nurse in Indonesia at the time of the disaster, but felt compelled to return and contribute to the relief effort. Another young woman working as a cook in Tokyo during 3/11 explained, “At the time of the earthquake ... there was a sense that we needed to keep working precisely because of the disaster. But I had such a strange feeling watching things up here. I was on a three-year contract then, but it ended. Even among free people, I am especially free.” Another prominent category of volunteers free from the demands of conventional work consisted of retired men with families in central Japan. I volunteered with two retirees from Tokyo, who both spent one week each month at the center. One described his work there to me as a kind of *asobi* (play), an absorbing occupation that he found pleasurable satisfying after a career as a white-collar, salaried worker. Though his characterization of volunteering as play was designed to communicate modesty about his contri-

bution, it also aptly summed up the personal satisfaction that long-term volunteers derived from the engrossing physical labor of digging, cleaning, and building.

Short-term volunteers took overnight buses from Tokyo to spend one or two days at the center, before returning home or traveling on to sight-see elsewhere in Tōhoku. Every workday at the center ended with a group meeting during which the organization's staff made announcements and volunteers commented on their experiences or the communal living situation. At the end of each meeting, departing volunteers stood to offer some reflections on their stay. Most observed that their perspective of the disaster had changed. They echoed that “to stand on the actual site” and “see with their own eyes” the aftermath of the tsunami helped them understand what they could not via their television in Tokyo. In fact, volunteer coordinators argued that the continued traffic of visitors from central to northeastern Japan was valuable because it communicated to victims that they had not been forgotten. One NPO staff member explained, “In coming to the disaster area, you give strength to the victims [*hisaisha*]. They see that volunteers are still coming, from Japan and all over the world, to support us.” Likewise, he encouraged us “to greet the victims with spirited ‘good mornings’ and ‘hellos,’ and talk to them.” Following his advice, we greeted the elderly grandmothers tending their garden plots and made purchases from shopkeepers who had restarted their businesses in prefab shops set up to serve evacuees and recovery workers. Yet there was little chance for most volunteers to have substantive exchanges with local residents. As our small groups traveled through the quiet disaster zone to and from our worksites, evacuees moved around us in their daily routines of school, shopping, and work.

One notable exception was a gregarious elderly man who visited the community garden site nearly every day and chatted with us during our breaks. During one conversation about the costs of reconstruction, he remarked in an inexplicably cheerful tone, “They’re waiting for us to die.” After two years of inaction, he suspected that government did not intend to rebuild the area. Rather, he explained, they would continue to delay until the young families had left the region and the remaining elderly died off. His comments are expressive of the frustration felt by many survivors, their sense of abandonment and alienation from the reconstruction process. In municipalities up and down Tōhoku’s coast, residents have expressed concerns not just about the pace of rebuilding, but also about their exclusion from its planning. One particularly thorny issue has been the costly replacement of seawalls and breakwaters that instilled a sense of security in coastal residents, but failed to protect them on 3/11. Kamai-shi was a particularly egregious example: the sixty-foot-deep breakwa-

ter, which took thirty years and \$1.5 billion of public funding to complete, crumpled under the first tsunami.¹¹ Evaluating such failures, planners and policy-makers initially emphasized reconstruction as a chance to abandon the hubris of centralized development and consolidate the coast into disaster-resilient smart communities. Along with many residents of Kamaishi, they were dismayed when the central government quickly and quietly approved plans to rebuild the breakwater. It has proven easier for municipal planners to secure government funding for such construction projects than for more-innovative but less-construction-intensive plans. Thus, the city's reconstruction plans—released on their municipal Web site (Kamaishi shi 2014a)—detail massive engineering and earthworks projects that will consolidate districts that are most vulnerable to future tsunami and rebuild them atop elevated plains.

In contrast to the immensity of such plans, NPOs such as Magokoro Netto envisioned their purpose as that of easing the tension and isolation experienced by evacuees. The small recreational spaces they maintained through volunteer effort were designed to provide evacuees with temporary respite. Many volunteers were motivated by the idea that their efforts to attend to the feelings of evacuees also served as an intervention amid the larger structural deadlock that gripped the coast. This was the case with one young group of volunteers who visited Magokoro Netto: newly hired central government employees sent by their respective ministries from Tokyo in small groups to experience the disaster aftermath. I overlapped for several days with one such group during my time at the center. On the night before they departed, they shared their earnest personal reflections on what they'd seen. Nearly all noted that their visit had made them aware that Japan's government must better understand what life is like in the tsunami-devastated regions. What is needed, several observed, is not just large-scale construction projects, but small human gestures to improve the circumstances and spirits of evacuees. Likewise, many volunteers and organizers saw their work as a direct form of human-to-human engagement that can break through the debility miring Kamaishi and other coastal localities.

Representing an engaged and self-motivated civic sphere, volunteers and nonprofit relief organization comprise one element of a decentralizing Japan. They are not the risk-embracing, competitive individuals normally associated with neoliberal ideals. Rather they reflect what Illana Gershon (2011, 539) characterizes as a ubiquitous form of neoliberal agency that envisions people as repositories of talents to be mobilized and directed. In what she calls “a misrecognition of scale” (2011, 541), a similar logic extends to communities, that, according to the mandates of decentralization in Japan, can mobilize their energies and resources to support their

own autonomy and self-sufficiency. Prior to Tōhoku's disaster, questions about the future of aging and depopulating regions unable to survive the competitive climate of decentralization abounded. Such questions are even more critical in the context of post-disaster reconstruction. As the group of young government officials said their farewells at Magokoro Netto, one young man enthused, "Instead of just doing what we can, we need to do things we can't yet imagine." This earnest statement, expressive of a sincere desire to see the coast reconstructed, also hinted that this outcome was a possibility so difficult to envision that it required a flight of imagination. Such hopeful optimism that tsunami-devastated communities can sustain themselves on their own resolve and the support of volunteers soothe anxieties in Japan's center, but does little to ensure a viable future for Tōhoku's coast.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of 3/11, academics, pundits, politicians, and activists expressed widely shared expectations that the disasters in all their scale and fury would spark needed political and social change in Japan. Such expectations derive from seeing the catastrophes as revelatory events that exposed the troubled legacies of Japan's centralized high-speed growth era—including entrenched regional inequalities and energy insecurities long masked by Japan's prosperity. The idea that catastrophes are "revealing crises" that lay bare features of social and political order has become a cornerstone concept among disaster scholars (Garcia-Acosta 2002, 50; Oliver-Smith 1996, 304). In Japan, 3/11 sparked a mood of critical reflection on the costs of centralization. It prompted continued support for decentralization as a strategy for producing resilient local economies, self-sufficient regions, and a stronger and more sustainable nation. In fact, the Tōhoku disasters have highlighted unlikely consensus between neoliberal market enthusiasts eager to streamline the bulky apparatus of Japan's central government, and advocates of a more inclusive and more diverse national model in which Japan's regions set their own autonomous priorities of sustainable development.

Given the sluggish pace of recovery on Tōhoku's coast, I have argued here that the revelations associated with the 3/11 disasters remain detached from the logistics of reconstruction. Two years after Kamaishi City's tsunami, groundbreaking had yet to begin on the massive engineering and construction projects that will be the first stages of a long-term rebuilding process. As residents, including a growing ratio of elderly survivors, endure extended delays, volunteers continue to visit the city to

work on small-scale relief projects that aim to boost the spirits of evacuees and provide them with *kokoro no kea* (heart-mind care). Meanwhile, reconstruction has been appropriated in diverse spheres as a rubric for discussing visions of Japan's future. Economist Fujita Masahisa (2011) argues that reconstruction provides an opportunity to create an updated "socio-economic system which values the knowledge of each individual, and which has more rich diversity and autonomy than the present." Like many commentators, he envisions Tōhoku's recovery from 3/11 as an important step in building a more resilient, flexible, and innovative nation. As I have shown here, Japan's disaster will also provide long-term insight into how a decentralizing state functions in the aftermath of catastrophe. This chapter suggests that as it devolves risks and responsibilities, decentralization will create new constellations of vulnerability in an era marked both by intensifying disasters and global economic precarity.

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Notes

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1. The Reconstruction Agency was created nearly a year after the disaster in February 2012 to replace a temporary Reconstruction Headquarters established in June 2011. Despite the frequency of earthquakes, tsunami, typhoons, volcanoes, and

other natural catastrophes in Japan, there is no permanent agency to manage disasters. The Reconstruction Agency has a ten-year mandate.

2. Here I follow Japanese practice by listing the names of Japanese authors with surname first, followed by given name.
3. The Tōhoku disasters will serve as important case studies for understanding the relationship between aging and catastrophe. Preliminary reports suggest that over half of all tsunami fatalities were elderly, and that large numbers of elderly survivors presented enormous challenges for those providing relief. At the same time, the social resources of the elderly served as strengths in the wake of the disaster.
4. As one rare counter-example, sociologist Oguma Eiji (2011) has broached sensitive questions about the prospects of Tōhoku's future.
5. After an investigation into deaths at the disaster prevention center, located in Kamaishi's Unosumai District, the city released a formal report (Kamaishi shi 2014b), and held information meetings for families of those who perished in the center.
6. In addition to washing away thousands of bodies, the tsunami destroyed family graves, Buddhist household altars, and local crematoriums. These sites are considered vital to the ritual care needed to help the deceased attain a comfortable afterlife.
7. These figures are compiled in a report by Zenkoku shakai fukushi kyōgikai (2012, 20). The report also notes the difficulty of gathering accurate statistics on volunteers, given that some reported to different centers or made multiple trips to the disaster site.
8. See Avenell (2012) for further analysis both of the 1995 volunteer response to Kobe and the Japanese government's active facilitation of post-3/11 volunteering.
9. In Genda's formulation, hope produces action that might lead toward a better future. This future orientation gives hope utility as a force productive of deliberate social change, but distinguishes it from other scholarly visions of hope. For example, North American cultural theorist Brian Massumi situates hope firmly in the present, "separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success" (Massumi 2003, 211).
10. Soble (2013) and Kingston (2014) critically assess this nuclear agenda.
11. For further details on this engineering debacle, see Onishi 2011.

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