

POLICY BRIEF

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Restoring Livelihoods after Disasters: The Case of Fukushima's Nuclear Evacuees

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Highlights

Restoring the livelihoods of people displaced by disasters involves a dual challenge: re-establishing the means for making a living while adapting to a new environment. Fukushima's nuclear evacuees are facing this challenge within the context of a response-to-recovery transition characterised by increasingly diversified living conditions. This calls for targeted policies enabling people to plan their futures irrespective of where they decide to do so.

Recommendations:

- Policy reorientation during the transition should be informed by a thorough analysis of the evacuees' changing situations, their livelihood strategies and self-reliance abilities without existing compensation and/or relief measures.
- Host communities need to be supported in order to provide livelihood support programmes tailored to the needs of the displaced and assist the integration of people prone to isolation.
- Measures to facilitate understanding between the host communities and displaced populations should focus on issues of common interest.

Disasters, Displacement and Livelihoods

The more severe the impact of a disaster, the longer it takes for people to subsequently rebuild their lives. Since Japan's March 2011 triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident), this challenge has loomed particularly large for evacuees due to the nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Access to livelihoods and employment are among the core criteria used to determine the extent to which durable solutions have been achieved, through return to the place of origin, local integration at the place of evacuation or resettlement in a different location (Inter Agency Standing Committee 2010, 34). In the longer term, however, the ability of displaced people to achieve social integration becomes an important indicator of their wellbeing in these environments.

Livelihood strategies are not formed in a vacuum — they are shaped by the social, economic and political contexts in which people live. Restoration of livelihoods should therefore be understood in relation to people's ability to rebuild their lives as full members of their communities. This policy brief analyses challenges faced by different types of evacuees displaced by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in the process of livelihood restoration and social integration. It provides recommendations for ensuring that policymaking during the response-to-recovery transition generates an

enabling environment for nuclear evacuees to rebuild their livelihoods and restart their lives in new environments.

Evacuees in Diverse Situations

Radioactive contamination spread across vast areas after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident, resulting in mass evacuations. According to the government's Nuclear Disaster Victims Support Team, nearly 110,000 people were forced to leave the evacuation zones set up around the damaged nuclear plant in the early aftermath of the accident. Meanwhile over 40,000 are estimated to have left other parts of Fukushima, where radiation increased but no evacuation zones were designated, although their actual numbers are not known. This latter category includes many mothers who fled with their children due to fear about health risks posed by radiation, while their husbands remained behind for work (Hasegawa 2013).

The triple disaster has negatively impacted 25.9% of jobs in Fukushima (International Labour Organisation 2015, 19) causing people to temporarily or permanently leave their jobs. The nuclear accident forced businesses and public enterprises to close, and only a small number have since

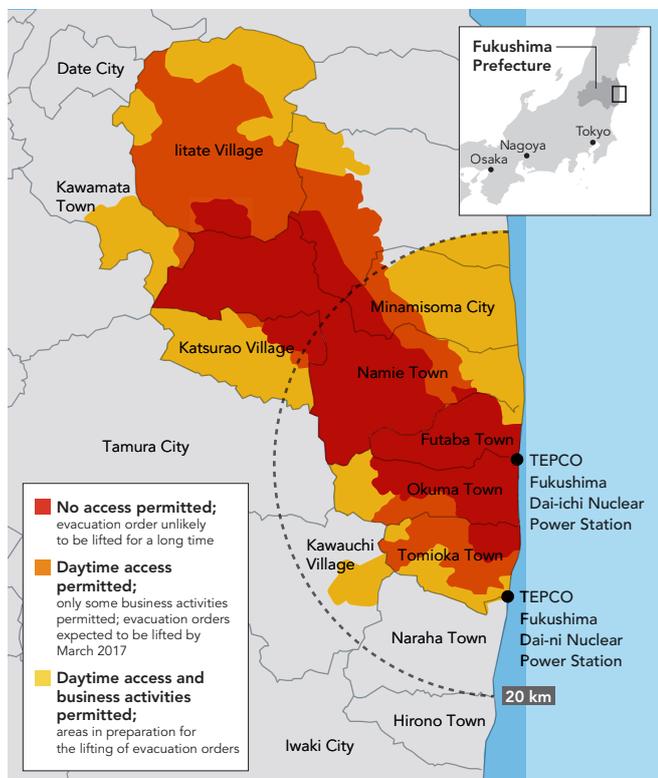
reopened in other locations or following adjustments to the evacuation zones. The nuclear disaster also devastated the reputation of agricultural and fisheries products from the entire prefecture, and prices and sales have yet to recover.

Over four and a half years after the disaster, restoration of livelihoods is evolving within a context of transition from immediate response to longer-term recovery. Relief policies such as emergency housing and job creation schemes were introduced in the early stages after the disaster, and the transition as these are phased out entails considerable uncertainty for the affected individuals, particularly displaced populations. Within this context, the conditions under which the evacuees from the mandatory evacuation zones and those from outside these zones — the so-called "voluntary" evacuees — seek to restore their livelihoods and restart their lives are growing increasingly diverse.

Many mandatory evacuees still live in prefabricated temporary housing facilities or rented apartments appropriated by the authorities as emergency temporary housing. These are primarily located in Fukushima prefecture, but also in other parts of Japan. Mandatory evacuees receive compensation payments according to factors such as the category of the area where they previously lived, which is categorised by the government according to the level of radiation exposure, the value of their property and their pre-disaster employment status.

The map on this page shows the most recent evacuation zones. These have been readjusted several times and evacuation orders have been lifted in some areas. The most recent adjustment in September 2015 reduced the official count of mandatory evacuees to some 70,000, but it has further deepened the divide between recipients of compensation. Voluntary evacuees from other regions of Fukushima only received limited one-time payments, insufficient to even cover relocation costs. For many of them, evacuation became a viable option because in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear disaster the rented flats appropriated as emergency temporary housing were provided to any evacuees. In Fukushima, these were mostly reserved for mandatory evacuees, so many voluntary evacuees ended up in flats provided as temporary housing in other parts of Japan.

Emergency temporary housing was initially provided for two years, but the leases have been extended several times by one-year periods. In mid-2015, the government announced that all of these programmes would be terminated by March 2017. Afterwards, mandatory evacuees have the



Mandatory evacuation areas in Fukushima prefecture, as of 5 September 2015.

Source: adapted from Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Japan.

option of moving into subsidised disaster recovery housing being built around Fukushima prefecture. This option is not available to voluntary evacuees, and no housing schemes are currently in place for them after March 2017.

Restarting Lives in Limbo

Both mandatory and voluntary evacuees have repeatedly noted that the single-year extensions of emergency housing leases have been limiting their ability to make longer-term plans for rebuilding their lives.

For mandatory evacuees, the key question in the early stages after the disaster was when it would be possible to return home. As their displacement grew more protracted, however, their prospects of reclaiming normal lives after returning to their towns and villages dwindled. Former farmers in particular struggled to visualise their livelihoods after the lifting of evacuation orders. Though many felt attached to their land, they saw little chance of it providing viable livelihoods after its designation as off-limits following the nuclear accident. Beyond a loss of productive assets, for the elderly this often led to a sense of deeper loss of meaning for their lives. As one elderly evacuee noted: "what will be the point of farming now that my grandchildren do not dare to eat anything that comes from Fukushima?"

Mandatory evacuees trying to restart their lives in their new communities are also facing difficulties. For business owners, making the investment required to reopen in a new location is both risky and costly, and would lead to conflict with similar local businesses. Finding other types of employment is not simple, either. The response-to-recovery transition has been characterised by a clear mismatch between the types of job offers and applicants in the labour market. Work related to decontamination or decommissioning may be widely available, but is often not the type of work evacuees are looking for. Focus group discussions have revealed that it is not uncommon for mandatory evacuees seeking work to be met with resentment from local residents, who see them as competing for scarce jobs when they could live off compensation. Many evacuees feel that residents in their host communities look at them with envy, believing that they are getting rich from compensation payments. Moreover, mandatory evacuees often feel pressured by policies aimed at encouraging them to return home by lifting the evacuation orders and eventually terminating compensation. According to a residents association representative from one temporary housing complex: "the government turns neither eyes nor ears to our situations — once the policy direction is set, that's all it cares about."

Evacuees from outside the evacuation zones also struggle to rebuild their lives. While most of them evacuated to protect the health of their children, this often led to split households, straining finances and relationships. Many evacuated without setting a timeframe and as years pass in limbo, many are now struggling to plan their future. Host communities, relatives and friends who stayed in Fukushima often have limited understanding of these struggles. As news about Fukushima increasingly focuses on recovery rather than the consequences of the nuclear accident, many voluntary evacuees are seen as overreacting to existing radiation levels.

Mothers who evacuated with their children often became de facto single parents, and struggled to find jobs or to overcome feelings of isolation in new communities. When job-seeking they often encountered employers unwilling to hire them because they do not know how long they will stay, and they have to take time off work when their children are ill. In some cases, husbands who stayed in Fukushima have eventually found jobs in the same place to which their families evacuated, but this often meant accepting positions with lower pay and status. In many cases, however, mothers felt pressured to return to Fukushima even if they were still concerned about radiation levels. Usually this was due to economic and psychological pressures arising from prolonged separation from their husbands. Maintaining dual households is costly, even if many voluntary evacuees live in flats with rents covered by the emergency housing schemes. Some mothers had to weigh the stress of separating their children from their fathers and friends, against their concerns about remaining radiation. Decisions to return often coincided with the children's transition to higher stages of education (e.g., from junior high to high school) to facilitate their re-integration. In addition, some experienced significant deterioration in their relationships with their husbands, and felt obliged to return in order to avoid divorce.

Supporting a Holistic Recovery

For people displaced by disasters, restoring livelihoods and rebuilding lives requires achieving some degree of stability under uncertain circumstances. In the response-to-recovery transition, the termination of relief measures introduced soon after the disaster, without providing alternative measures, risks exacerbating these uncertainties. For Fukushima's nuclear evacuees, this transition comes at a time when their situations are diversifying. This calls for targeted policies in such areas as housing and employment that acknowledge peoples' need for certainty about their

situations to make longer-term plans for their futures. Specifically, this means redesigning policies by considering:

- **A thorough analysis of evacuee conditions.** While considerable effort has been invested into surveying return intentions of mandatory evacuees, no systematic assessment has been conducted on their capacity to sustain themselves without compensation. Likewise, there is a serious lack of data on conditions faced by voluntary evacuees and those whose compensation was terminated following changes to the evacuation zones.
- **Livelihood support programmes facilitating community integration.** Persistent uncertainty discouraged many mandatory as well as voluntary evacuees from integrating properly. They thus face the dual challenge of restoring their livelihoods and integrating into a new environment. Municipalities hosting many evacuees require both manpower and resources to be able to provide employment counselling and support programmes tailored to the needs of the displaced populations. Also, special measures are needed to include evacuees who may not be able to work and thus may be prone to isolation, including the elderly and mothers with young children.
- **Fostering mutual understanding between evacuees and their host communities.** The difference in compensation, relief measures and perceptions of radiation risks have created tension within the displaced groups and between evacuees and their host communities. Investments should be made to relieve pressures on the public and social services of the host communities caused by the inflow of evacuees. Furthermore, more resources should be channelled into initiatives of common interest to different groups among displaced populations and host communities,

such as parent groups or clubs for the elderly, to facilitate interaction and foster mutual understanding.

In countries recovering from large-scale disasters, a smooth relief-to-recovery transition requires an adjustment of policies based on carefully considered criteria that allow for flexibility when applied to real-life situations. Options must be created for the displaced, enabling them to choose where to rebuild their lives, without pushing them in one direction. There may be short-term political gains from terminating policies that are a reminder of the displacement induced by nuclear disaster. However, redesigning policies without considering the actual needs of the displaced population will create more serious problems of socio-economic marginalisation over the longer term.

Note

This analysis draws on interviews and focus group discussions conducted by the author in June and September 2014 with representatives of local authorities and residents of the municipalities displaced by the Fukushima nuclear accident. It also incorporates findings from interviews conducted by the author in June–July 2015 with evacuees from outside the evacuation zones residing outside Fukushima and civil society groups supporting evacuees in different parts of Japan.

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