

May 19, 2013

## Proposal

# Voices of Children from Tohoku

## Sharing our experiences to improve Disaster Risk Reduction in the world

We are children from Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures and we are still affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of March 11, 2011.

We 32 students from junior high or high schools in the affected regions, participated in a workshop conducted by Save the Children Japan (SCJ) in Sendai. We discussed ways in which we could enhance efforts in Disaster Risk Reduction after 3.11.

The experience of 3.11 made us re-realize the importance of being connected with others. We would like to have a platform from which to communicate with children all over the world. We would also like to cooperate with each other across borders, race and religion. We believe that listening to other people and learning from their opinions help us widen our perspectives and generate better ideas. Through such processes, we can find something new that we had not seen before.

After the disaster, we received generous support and countless prayers from people all over the world. We really appreciate it. In return, we will continuously try to contribute to the world along with our friends all over the world, by doing whatever we can do.

Here are our opinions that we have compiled through discussions among the 32 students from the affected regions. We talked thoroughly in order to generate something helpful for people in the world, and to encourage improvements in Disaster Risk Reduction. Please listen to our voices.

### **1. Please listen to us and make good use of our opinions for the future**

#### **1.1. Please don't tell us that we are too young**

Please do not ignore us but reflect upon our opinions.

We attend meetings and participate in exchanging views in order to convey our thoughts to adults. Unfortunately, our opinions are often labeled just as “issues to be considered.” We have not even been informed or provided updates about the process or current status of our previous proposals. Please do not merely hear our voices. Please realize our opinions. If our opinions are utilized, we can discuss further and move forward.

Age is not a big issue when we express our opinions or perform an action. At the same time, we realize that there are some adults who are concerned with our age. In fact, we are often told that we are too young and there are things that we are unable to carry out because of our age.

We have discussed with adults our ideas for recreating our community after the disaster. In one such meeting we received feedback from an adult who said:

“We recognized that we have to let children participate in the process of creating our community. Children work harder and better than what society expects of them. Only if they have an opportunity to express their opinions will children make great contributions. I realized these things through these activities with the children.”

In addition, the members of the Children's Community Building Clubs submitted proposals to local governments so that our voices would be reflected in the local recovery process. The mayors said, “We need opinions from all people including children in every town. Children are the ones who shoulder the future.” They said that they would create a platform to promote dialogue between children and adults and provide membership to the ‘Committee for Reconstruction’ (approximate translation) for children and adults to discuss together. We consider this as a fruit of our efforts to convey our thoughts and opinions to adults. As long as adults open discussions to us, we can contribute greatly to creating a better community.

For those of us who live in the inland areas it is often especially hard to participate in volunteer activities at sites in the affected areas. We are told that we are not able to go because we are “not an adult.” We understand adults may worry about things such as: “Children can’t be responsible,” “It is too risky for children to do volunteer activities without adult supervision,” or “Children cannot find a sponsor.” We understand their concerns, but we would like them to consider how our youth could be of some advantage. We may be able to build a better rapport and provide better comfort to people from our generation if we are allowed to go. We really want adults to create a system so that children can easily engage in volunteer work in the affected areas.

The passion we children carry to help in our recovery process by expressing opinions or engaging in various activities is equal to that of adults. There should be no discrimination because of our age. Please listen to our opinions.

## **1.2. Please create an environment for children to build a better community for the future**

The experience of 3.11 has built our understanding of Disaster Risk Reduction from the viewpoint not only of adults, but also from the viewpoint of children. We should be the ones to actively carry out the recovery process, as the future of our communities rests in the hands of children. Currently, while we have a desire to take part in the recovery efforts, there are few opportunities for us to initiate such an involvement. For example, there is a program through which those who live inland and were little affected by 3.11 can go to the affected areas to interact with people of the same generation. Children do participate in this program, yet the restraints on our participation make our involvement somewhat passive. We believe this is because such programs are organized and run by adults who barely reflect on our opinions, and thus there are not

enough opportunities for us to do what we would like to do for those who are still affected by 3.11. The end result is that we often find ourselves participating in programs that remain far from what we want to do or achieve.

We have had opportunities to participate in discussions about how to create our communities, like those at the Children's Community Building Clubs. Often, however, there is an age limit to joining in with such activities. Even worse, we rarely get access to information about these activities. We hardly ever see such announcements at schools or in community centers. Sometimes children cannot join in such activities because their parents become anxious and think, "The host might charge us fees," or "Who will take responsibility if an accident occurs to a child?" In such an environment, only a limited number of children can participate in these activities. Yet there are many children who are keen to join in the recovery process. Please improve accessibility to information. Please create more opportunities and places for us children to express our opinions.

Through participation, children can develop a sense of belonging within their community, and this may encourage them to stay and live in their hometown. By cooperating together with adults, children can commit to create their own communities not only in an emergency situation such as a disaster or reconstruction project, but also in everyday life. Please let us be involved in building our communities and creating a shared future.

### **1.3. Listen, talk, spread our opinions and reflect: Please value these 4 steps**

Oftentimes children are not heard in meetings simply because we are not adults. We want to have opportunities where we can express our opinions equally with adults. If we can combine the logical and realistic view of adults with the unfettered creativity of us children, we believe that our opinions can be limitless and full of possibilities. What matters most is not who said what, but what is said.

It seems that our opinions are only shared with a small number of people. We would like to make our voices heard by a large number of people, so please spread our opinions to the wider public.

We have now had several opportunities to convey our opinions to adults, however, we feel few of them have actually been reflected upon, let alone acted upon. We are not asking for all of our opinions to be realized, but at least please reflect upon them. Please cooperate and make good use of our ideas and keep us posted.

To realize these four steps we need your help. So please help us.

## **2. We ask that you please remember and act upon the following five requests**

### **2.1. Please release more relevant information promptly**

**Please make more information available during future disasters, as there was far too little information available during the 3.11**

Immediately after the disaster, there were no clear instructions regarding where we should evacuate to. We knew nothing about evacuation sites and could not judge if

any given information was right or not. This occurred in Fukushima, Iwate and Miyagi Prefectures. In Fukushima Prefecture, some people evacuated to higher radiation areas, as there were no specific instructions from the government as to where to go, or where to avoid. The government issued evacuation orders for residents within a certain circle, but we feel it was a mistake to delimit the areas by radiuses as wind and cloud affected the amount of radiation that spread into each area. To make matters worse, the government was actually aware of their mistake, as the System for Prediction of Environmental Emergency Dose Information (SPEEDI) had already detected it. It was not, however, until March 23<sup>rd</sup> that the government released this information. We strongly believe that such vital information should always be conveyed to us promptly. The government has to release official information in a timely manner. In this case, due to lack of adequate information, adults were unable to protect their children and keep them safe, which in turn caused children a tremendous amount of stress. If adults had been aware of what was happening, such chaos would not have enveloped their children. We should all be aware that the stress adults experience has a large impact on the wellbeing of their children.

### **Please collect and disseminate the relevant information in case of emergency**

The people affected in coastal areas needed a variety of information. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, there were only limited ways to acquire information as communication and information collection systems had been destroyed. Many children were in school because the disaster occurred on a weekday. Children, especially those in evacuation centers, experienced a painful time because they were worried about the safety of their family members. They were unable to take any action themselves because they didn't have the required information.

We have another problem with the lack of information available. When children in inland areas want to support those in the affected regions, we children cannot find out what the affected children and adults really want. Although we assume that the government faces the same problem, we would like to point out the need to enhance the support given to those in the affected areas with an understanding of what those people actually want.

Please help prepare against emergency situations by placing opinion boxes in the City Hall and other government buildings. Please utilize the voices gathered through these opinion boxes so that the government can deliver helpful and reliable information through the media to everybody in Japan.

### **2.2. Please create equal opportunities for all children to go on vacation**

Taking a vacation or going to places with less radiation can release our stress and enhance our immune system, which will eventually heal our cells that have been damaged by radiation.

For us to go on vacation, at least one of our parents have to accompany us, which means we cannot go anywhere if both parents are working. Also, it is difficult for high school students to go on vacation, as there are only a few programs for them while there are plenty of recreation programs available for elementary and junior high school students. The children whose parents have a high awareness of radiation go on vacation often, while the children whose parents have a low awareness do not.

The residents in high radiation areas should go to places with low radiation, however, in reality, not everybody can go on vacation. Is this fair when the Constitution of Japan stipulates equality under the law (Article 14)?

Please support recreation programs all over the world so that more and more children can participate in activities regardless of the situation of their parents.

### **2.3. Please create opportunities for us to reunite with the friends we were separated from**

Affected by the earthquake and tsunami of March 11 and the accidents at the nuclear power plants, we have been unable to go back to our hometowns. We have been separated from our close friends. We really miss our school days with them in our hometowns and we want to see each other again. Some parents, however, disapprove of their children going back to regions with high levels of radiation detected because they are worried about the health of their children. Some children cannot see their long lost friends because of their parents' policy regarding radiation.

Now that we are unable to return to our hometowns, we have no place to go back to see our old friends. Thus, we would appreciate opportunities such as meetings or events where we get to be reunited with our long lost friends without worrying about the cost of transportation.

### **2.4. Please create opportunities for us to mingle so we can get rid of discrimination**

Due to there being little interaction between locals and those displaced, some residents from the local community have started discriminating against those residents who have moved into the area and are causing trouble for them. To remedy this situation, we need opportunities to communicate and get to know each other.

### **2.5. Please take measures to address children's mental health**

First, please make a sufficient number of counselors available. Although it is difficult to heal the wounds of children who have lost their parents and/or friends, talking to a counselor can be an encouraging experience. The existence of a person like a counselor can make a big difference to a child, especially those who stay indoors and cry over losing their parent(s). It is easier for them to talk with a counselor about the things that they may find difficult to share with other people. Talking to a counselor can ease their stress a lot. Therefore, please make more counselors available.

Second, please create many opportunities for the children affected by 3.11 to share their experiences. It can serve as a therapeutic tool for those who have problems talking to adults and vocalizing their feelings and pain. Through such processes the children may sort out their various feelings, and little by little become relaxed.

### **3. Let's re-consider Disaster Risk Reduction and Prevention efforts together and realize them!**

#### **3.1. Please reflect upon our opinions and build a disaster tolerant community**

In the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, schools in coastal areas were severely affected by the tsunami. Given the known risk of tsunamis, why were schools built so close to the sea in the first place? All possible risks including tsunamis should have been considered in their construction. Making good use of this experience, from now on, safety should come first when we choose a site to build any public facility.

We are still short of schools and housing. Please build safe housing facilities such as apartment buildings for those who still live in inconvenient temporary housing.

It was once believed that the nuclear power plants in Fukushima were safe, but sadly it was neither the earthquake nor tsunami, but the accidents at the nuclear power plants that caused such a catastrophe in Fukushima. They took away the homes and playgrounds of children and we want the world to know that.

We will convey our experiences and opinions to local and national authorities to be reflected upon and to help them to create a disaster tolerant community.

#### **3.2. Please prepare emergency supplies that are friendly for socially vulnerable people such as babies and young children**

Without emergency supplies, it is difficult for us to protect ourselves against the cold and to treat injuries when emergencies occur. Our experience was of no stoves being available after the disaster and we were freezing despite being wrapped-up in layers of blankets. The 3.11 disaster occurred in winter, but we must always be prepared as disaster can strike during any season.

In the period after the disaster there were many children who were left out of the fun because they had lost their toys to play with. Thus, the provision of toys would be appreciated.

Another issue was the lack of baby food. Parents of infants had a very hard time finding baby food after the disaster. They had to travel long distances in order to purchase daily necessities while carrying their babies and avoiding dangerous places filled with debris. Thus, we should all consider the needs of the socially vulnerable such as babies and children so that the required emergency supplies are ready next time.

#### **3.3. Please provide us with relevant and safe information**

Every household must have an emergency evacuation area planned in advance. During the disaster, it was extremely difficult for everybody to contact family members. As most of us did not have an evacuation area decided upon in advance, we did not know where to go. We were very frustrated not knowing the whereabouts of our family members.

It is also important for schools and parents to discuss emergency counter-measures. In case of emergency, schools and parents must work together in order to minimize potential casualties.

Please put more evacuation route signs in place. It would make it easier for us to evacuate to a safe place smoothly and quickly if we can actually see signs showing the evacuation route.

Please keep sending out information so that people all over the world can learn about the disaster. The more information people receive the more likely they will find it interesting, and this personal interest can act as a stepping stone to enhance public awareness.

### **3.4. Please actively promote disaster education**

On the day of 3.11, children who had experienced training for emergency situations followed the directions given by their teachers and managed to evacuate safely during the earthquake and tsunami. It was because we had performed emergency drills and we all knew what to do. However, there were cases where the adults misjudged the situation and failed to save the lives of children. This is why disaster risk reduction education is very important and should reach out to everybody, especially those in vulnerable populations. We believe the local and central governments should provide disaster risk reduction education so as to help protect children from future disasters.

If we start learning about disaster risk reduction when we are young, we will be able to assess the situation accurately and to protect others and ourselves in case of emergency. We believe that disaster risk reduction education should be thoroughly reinforced and made available from the youngest ages. Also, as a part of our education there should be a class on when and how to evacuate on our own.

It is important to raise awareness in more and more people about disasters and their prevention through education and training.

### **3.5. We would like to create a hazard map, and to conduct emergency drills along with other community members**

The hazard map created by adults has not been sufficiently circulated and many people have not seen it or even know about it. Even if we see the map we cannot utilize it well because it contains too many difficult Kanji (Chinese characters) or its evacuation routes are long and complicated. Therefore, we want to create an effective and child-friendly map through actual fieldwork and discussion with experts, and make this a part of our school curriculum. Our hazard map should be practical and easy to understand, not only for children but also for adults.

Once we have created a map, we would then like to involve the members of our community and conduct emergency drills. During the disaster, some schools directed students to the school grounds for evacuation as they had done in a drill, and they ended being caught up in the tsunami. Therefore, it is important to have alternate evacuation locations outside of school grounds such as up a nearby mountain or in a town nearby. We also believe it is more effective to involve the entire community in emergency drills, and to conduct them in different seasons as disasters can occur at any time of the year.

These are the ideas that we have come up with in order for us to realize better disaster risk reduction and prevention efforts. Please work with us so that we can be more prepared in case of emergency.

#### **4. Please share and pass our on experiences to posterity**

##### **4.1. Please help us share our experiences with as many people as possible**

Now that two years have passed and the whole experience of 3.11 is fading into history, our awareness of disaster risk reduction is also decreasing. Please give us an opportunity to share information about this disaster with as many people as possible in the world, as we believe that this information helps us raise awareness about disaster risk reduction.

We have not been able to share news of the current situation in the affected areas, the feelings and thoughts of those who are affected, nor the opinions extracted from our experience of the disaster. In Japan, the media does not report on the updates that follow big disasters in the world, and we have no idea what their current situation is or what kind of support they are looking for. On a similar note, we do not know whether other countries have been following up on our present situation or not.

We do not even know if the rest of this country has been following our plight since the disaster. So please create opportunities where we can update information on our recovery both within and outside of the affected areas. This information should be shared not only within the government, but also with everybody else, from children to the elderly.

Currently, reports or position papers written by children tend to be directed to the government and are not widely shared among people in the affected areas. As the government does not share information such as recovery plans in a timely manner, people are often left uninformed for a long time. There is a situation where only a few people possess information about the recovery plans. These few people sometimes do not sufficiently share this information with others, even those in the affected regions. And of course those outside of the affected regions receive even less information. This prevents people outside of the affected areas maintaining a continued awareness about disaster risk reduction. It also interferes with the continued support we receive from outside of the affected areas and further isolates us.

Thus, we believe that sharing information helps the public learn more about disaster risk reduction and prevention, reminds them of our experience and most importantly, keeps the public's attention focused on the recovery of our communities. We should utilize all media such as newspapers, free papers, TV, radio and the Internet to share information with those who live outside of the affected areas and even those living overseas.



## 4.2. Please pass down our experiences from generation to generation

Please learn about what 3.11 put us through and what disasters may occur in your community and start work on counter-measures.

A lot of lives were lost because we had never experienced something like this disaster before in our area and had no idea of what to do. If we equip ourselves with knowledge, when next time a disaster strikes our community we will at least know what best to do to protect ourselves, our community and our country.

On 3.11, those who knew what to do and evacuated to a hill survived, while those who drove away instead of running were swept up by the tsunami. That is why we need to share and pass down accurate information about this tsunami and its effects to our offspring, so that they can be prepared for future emergencies.

We have thought of two specific ways to prevent our experiences being forgotten. One is to leave something tangible. If we can create a memorial of some kind for people to see, it projects a strong impression and appeals directly to people's feelings. We would like to create a Tsunami Model and a wooden Monument.

In the Tsunami Model, we will create a geographic model of our town and pour water into the model to show how the tsunami hit the area. We believe that this would be a great way to keep the memory of 3.11 alive.

The Monument should be made out of wood rather than stone. We are afraid that a stone monument will eventually become just background scenery and that people will forget what it symbolizes. Our ancestors actually did erect a stone monument that read, "Do not build any houses beyond this point as a Tsunami has reached here," after they themselves had experienced a large tsunami.

Sadly, those warnings were not passed down to us. Houses were built beyond the unheeded monument, and many of those houses were swept away by the tsunami on 3.11. If we had followed that warning the number of casualties would have been far fewer. That is why we would like to create a Monument made of wood. It will require regular maintenance, even occasional replacement. Such care and restoration can serve as a re-occurring reminder of 3.11, not only for our generation, but also for our offspring.

Another way to convey our experiences is through culture. We thought it would be a good idea to utilize different cultural forms such as dance, songs, stories and folk tales to pass down our experience and resilience to as many people as possible, including future generations.

In our areas we have many local traditional dances, songs and festivals. However, traditional cultures are dying out in some areas. The disaster and its aftermath took away festival sites and stages where dancing and singing took place. This is making it difficult to continue with our traditional culture.

So, we would like to revitalize our traditions that were almost swept away by the tsunami and utilize them as a reminder of 3.11. Each song and dance will carry its local culture and have a different taste. We thought this a great way to present our experiences,

to cooperate in the recovery of our communities and to help pass our traditions onto the next generation.

There is an old tradition called “Tsunami Tendenko,” which means, “Just run away without thinking about others.” It stemmed from our ancestor’s experience of tsunamis and has been passed down from generation to generation. It has helped save numerous lives so far. We would like to convey this story to our offspring as well.

These are the ways we have come up with to pass on our experiences of the disaster and the recovery process to the next generation, and to minimize future damage caused by disasters.

We, as children from Tohoku, need your help to make our voices heard. We want our experiences and opinions to make a difference in other disasters elsewhere in the world or in the future. We will definitely continue with our disaster prevention and risk reduction efforts, both for our communities and for the world at large. So please help us by developing a system through which all children in the world can come together and cooperate, regardless of their country of origin, race or religion.

That is all. Thank you.