

Creating a “New Tohoku”

By Yoshiyuki Ogawa

Introduction

The Basic Policy adopted by cabinet decision on Dec. 26, 2012, the day that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet was inaugurated, states that “reconstruction from the Great East Japan Earthquake will be accelerated” and that the government “will go out to the disaster-stricken areas and will create a ‘new Tohoku’ as a place of creative power and potential, rather than stopping at merely the ‘minimum level of livelihood rehabilitation’.”

The disaster areas had been facing declining populations, industrial hollowing-out and other challenges even before the earthquake. Moreover, these issues are not limited to the disaster areas, but are shared by all regions. In undertaking recovery and reconstruction, measures are being taken to resolve those issues, and to seize the moment of reconstruction and create a “new Tohoku” by constructing a “future society of creative power and potential” that will serve as a model for the rest of Japan and worldwide instead of settling for a simple return to pre-earthquake conditions.

Specifically, the Reconstruction Promotion Committee (RPC), chaired by Motoshige Ito, professor at the Graduate School of Economics at the University of Tokyo, has been studying and deliberating the creation of a “new Tohoku” since March 2013. Based on the understanding that the answer to a challenge can be found at the source, the committee conducted field surveys and otherwise unearthed cutting-edge examples that were emerging from the regions while conducting studies from the perspective of experts through such means as roundtable sessions that brought together experts from a wide range of fields who have an intimate understanding of the disaster areas, and issued “Towards the Creation of ‘New Tohoku’ (The Interim Compilation of Discussions)” on June 5. The interim report took up the following five societies as visions for the future of the local community, and put together goals and policy directions for each of them on an interim basis.

- A Reliable Society to Promote the Fit and Healthy Growth of Children
- A Vibrant Super-Aged Society with “Elderly People as Standards”
- A Society with Sustainable Energy (Autonomous and Decentralized Energy)
- A Leading Society Introducing Robust and Highly Resilient Social Infrastructure
- A Society with the Ability of Wide Appeal in Utilizing Regional Resources

Since then, the Reconstruction Agency has been engaged in a variety of efforts, headlined by the “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects program, in order to give substance to these goals and policy directions.

“New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects

The “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects is a program created on the basis of the interim report to accelerate efforts aimed at the reconstruction of the disaster areas. Under the program, projects are publicly solicited from a wide range of players (businesses, universities and colleges, NPOs) to nurture leading projects that are already emerging from the disaster areas, broaden their geographical reach within the areas, and make them models for the Tohoku region and nationwide. Support to meet administrative and human resource needs (generating consensus among local stakeholders, dispatching experts to the area, verifying benefits) is the start-up phase of the projects.

In FY 2013, public solicitation was conducted from Aug. 1 to 20 with a view to selecting around 60 projects, and wound up generating more than 460 proposals. Some 66 projects were chosen after taking into consideration the opinions of the members of the RPC and other experts. Each implementing institution is at work on its project as the fiscal year draws to a close. The Reconstruction Agency received interim reports from the implementing institution regarding the “contents of the projects implemented so far”, “evaluation of progress and challenges for the future” and “contents of projects to be implemented during this fiscal year”. The interim reports are on public view at the Reconstruction Agency website: <http://www.reconstruction.go.jp/>

Now, we will take a look at the main activities under the program through the prism of the five societies introduced in the Interim Compilation.

(1) A Reliable Society to Promote the Fit and Healthy Growth of Children

The disaster areas are facing problems such as stress generated by the loss of play space and changes in the everyday environment. It is important in resolving these problems to proceed with the construction of a safe society where children are looked after so that they grow up lively and healthy through such measures as developing human resources capable of supporting the growth of children both physically and spiritually.

In the FY 2013 “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects, one project reinforces ties with regional volunteers in order to expand activities to create play space into a wide variety of regions as a sustainable undertaking, while another enables play leaders (instructors) to obtain emotional support and other expertise.

There also are efforts to help reconstruct urban communities by building the institutional framework to nurture the young locally by such means as providing the opportunity to local youths and children to experience the real world and grow as individuals.

For example, in the city of Ishinomaki in Miyagi Prefecture, a project is under way that is aimed at setting up a system in which the local community nurtures local high school students through such means as having them plot their own future and scout and develop workplace experience and internships on their own. In the city of Aizuwakamatsu in Fukushima Prefecture, a project is under way to construct a “circulatory local education model” in which human resources tied to the Aizu community nurture the human resources of the future. ITC venture businesses based in Aizu form the core of this undertaking, which draws in the University of Aizu, established as the first Japanese institute for higher education dedicated to computer sciences.

(2) A Vibrant Super-Aged Society with “Elderly People as Standards”

The proportional increase in the aged population in disaster areas due to such factors as the exodus of workers has been a conspicuous problem, putting the elderly at the forefront of the challenges posed by a super-geriatric society. In meeting these challenges, it is important to consider the construction of a society suited to the requirements of the elderly from a broad perspective encompassing such aspects as residence (housing and environment), mobility (means of transportation and transportation systems), alimentation (dietary needs), social interaction (working and inclusion in community activities), and healthy longevity (livelihood support and preventive care for self-reliance), with the “community” being the foundation for these aspects.

Among the FY 2013 “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects is one to promote comprehensive local care through collaboration between healthcare institutions, local governments and other players, and another project for health enhancement and community-building by encouraging the elderly to participate through community gardens.

For example, in Ishinomaki healthcare institutions, the local government, NPOs and other players are working together to promote “next-generation local healthcare” through the construction of a multi-occupational collaboration system. In the city of Rikuzentakata in Iwate Prefecture, elderly males, a population group

Photo: Reconstruction Agency



Power generation using heat from a hot spring at Tsuchiyu Onsen in Fukushima

disinclined to participate in community activities, are being encouraged to do so through cooking classes and food parties, which also promote the health of the community as a whole through the participation of experts.

Other undertakings include efforts to develop local communities not only for the elderly but for all generations through such means as mutual support within the communities and community development and management using community broadcasting.

For example, in the township of Otsuchi in Iwate Prefecture, a project is in progress to develop a model “community support center” that promotes mutual-assistance community support (such as childcare support and creating “space” for the primary and secondary education age group) through social participation by the elderly.

(3) A Society with Sustainable Energy (Autonomous and Decentralized Energy)

Response efforts to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent nuclear accident have been accompanied by calls for regional development that promotes renewable energy sources, raises energy efficiency, and promotes energy self-sufficiency and dispersion. Likewise, it is important in the disaster areas to undertake as part of the rebuilding process the construction of low-carbon intensity, energy-efficient local communities with self-sufficient and dispersed energy systems.

Among the FY 2013 “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects is one aimed at introducing renewable energy sources utilizing local resources and another aimed at introducing a self-sufficient and dispersed energy system.

For example, at the Tsuchiyu-Onsen Hot Spring in Fukushima Prefecture, efforts are under way to build a cutting-edge, eco-friendly hot spring community by using energy from the hot spring to run plant factories for vegetables and fruit, and land-based aquaculture



Photo: Reconstruction Agency

Vegetables growing at a plant of the Touzai Shirakawa agricultural cooperative

operations such as for soft-shell turtles, and developing merchandise that uses these products, integrating the primary, secondary and tertiary industries. In Miyako in Iwate Prefecture, efforts are under way to promote the city's smart community project by encouraging participation by citizens and developing a new template for public-private collaboration with local businesses.

(4) A Leading Society Introducing Robust and Highly Resilient Social Infrastructure

It is necessary in the disaster areas to use the lessons and knowledge gained from the earthquake disaster and introduce comprehensive measures to secure safety in order not only to avoid fatal damage during earthquakes and other disasters but also to swiftly achieve recovery. Specifically, it is important to take comprehensive action by joining the physical measures of “suppress” and “avoid” (such as constructing tsunami control facilities and shelters) to the intangible measures of “ameliorate” and “flee” (such as establishing evacuation plans and implementing evacuation drills).

Among the FY 2013 “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects is an undertaking in which the local residents take the lead in raising disaster prevention awareness and conducting evacuation drills and another in which they take the lead in designing residential areas and their environs with a view to developing local communities.

For example, there is a project in the coastal disaster areas in Miyagi in which a wide range of stakeholders including businesses, local governments, schools and residents are collaborating to consider such matters as evacuation training that match local needs and promotion of multigenerational participation. The objective is to make a habit of tsunami evacuation procedures and to propagate them in other regions. In Rikuzentakata, efforts are under way to design residential areas while reflecting the voices of the residents themselves under the concept of “a lifestyle where the everyday

pleasures of life are shared with family and friends”. Here, attempts are being made to design meeting places that are accessible and attractive by holding workshops for the residents.

(5) A Society with the Ability of Wide Appeal in Utilizing Regional Resources

The Tohoku region is blessed with abundant local resources (geographical features, climate, food, history and culture, technology and artisanship). It is imperative to utilize these resources for economic development by differentiating and giving meaning to the characteristics and strengths of Tohoku. Specifically, it is necessary to discover and recognize the value hidden in its primary industries, tourism and other local resources, and to maintain, enhance and market that value. To this end, it is important to promote the “value co-creation” business model, in which producers and consumers co-create new value for products through interaction.

A wide variety of projects are supported as FY 2013 “New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects, such as the development of highly competitive local products; establishment of unique standards regarding “health”, “tastiness” and other factors aimed at differentiation; and efforts to popularize the *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn) culture worldwide.

For example, in the city of Shirakawa in Fukushima Prefecture, efforts are under way to increase agricultural income by expanding the range of cultivars utilizing plant factories in hilly and mountainous areas, where large-scale, open-field agriculture is impossible. One project covers all the disaster areas in an effort to enhance the value of the *ryokan* in the global market by establishing a *ryokan*-only reservation site where reservations can be made from overseas and introducing an inventory control system that vitalizes the business flow between overseas travel agencies and the like. In Otsuchi, efforts are under way to develop new products aimed at the development of local manufacturing by fusing traditional artisanship and cutting-edge technology while promoting the social participation of handicapped people and the elderly by involving them in the manufacturing process.

In addition to these five visions of society, efforts are also under way to resolve the issues impeding them (lack of human resources, insufficient networks, lack of financial and other resources), such as an undertaking to construct platforms connecting leaders within and outside of the disaster areas and supporting local business startups and firms moving into new business lines.

For example, in Iwate and Miyagi, problem-solving workshops are being held that focus on issues arising in the disaster areas (such as children losing education opportunities) to nurture human resources with long-term dedication to resolving local problems. Also in Iwate,

local financial institutions, schools and tax accounting offices have collaborated to form a business startup consortium to host exchange events to match entrepreneurs and investors and to establish an investment fund.

Establishment of “New Tohoku” Public-Private Collaboration Council

These efforts to promote the creation of a “New Tohoku” have revealed the breadth of measures aimed at recovery not only by administrative agencies but also by a wide range of players (businesses, universities and colleges, NPOs), as the more than 460 submissions for Leading Model Projects show.

In order to sustain these efforts and use them to boost the sustainable vitality of the Tohoku region, it is important to create an institutional framework for the players active in the disaster areas to share information on their respective activities and collaborate. To this end, responding to a call from the reconstruction minister, the leaders of businesses, financial institutions, government agencies, universities and colleges and NPOs came together to establish the “New Tohoku” Public-Private Collaboration Council on Dec. 17, 2013. The council had approximately 680 legal entities and organizations as members as of February 2014, and more are expected to join.

Specifically, the council will engage in the effective sharing and exchange of information through such means as its website and meetings for its members, and provide supportive activities and other collaborative opportunities for all players.

The first initiative of the council is its dedicated website, which opened on Jan. 21, 2014. The website serves as the hub for information on the wide variety of support measures available for operations and undertakings in the disaster areas and on the various events taking place. Information concerning support in particular is available on the website for a range of activities including “financial support” (public aid, raising funds), “business startup/switching support” (management consulting on starting or entering new businesses, assistance in drawing up business plans), “manufacturing support” (testing and research, prototype development, technological collaboration, production control), “business development support” (test marketing, trial marketing, entering exhibitions, branding), and “personnel support” (human resource development, training).

The council’s second undertaking was to host an exchange meeting in Sendai on March 16, 2014. Some 170 members came together and shared and exchanged information concerning Leading Model Projects and the various support activities for

Photo: Reconstruction Agency



People taking part in an area-specific emergency drill

reconstruction. We hope that such meetings will be the catalyst for new collaborations and undertakings. We intend to continue to support these effective efforts so that the collaborative networks of the numerous players active in the disaster-stricken areas continue to grow.

Dedicated website: <http://www.newtohoku.org/>

Conclusion

So far, I have presented the efforts we are making at the Reconstruction Agency aimed at the creation of a “New Tohoku”. Other ministries and agencies are also engaged in projects related to the creation of a “New Tohoku”. For example, in Fukushima, the first full-scale demonstration project in Japan of an offshore floating wind turbine electricity generation system is under way.

The disaster areas are transitioning from the (largely) public sector-driven infrastructure and housing stage to the private sector-driven stage, where the regeneration of livelihoods and industries take center stage. As for challenges such as depopulation and aging, it is necessary for not only the government but also both the public and private sector to pool their respective strengths to overcome them.

“New Tohoku” Leading Model Projects will be implemented in FY 2014 as well, and proposals are currently being solicited. We intend to promote those and other efforts so that the Tohoku region will take the opportunities presented by reconstruction and lead the nation in overcoming the challenges common to all regions, and to inform the world of the results.

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