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**Fifteen Years of Disaster Volunteers in Japan:  
A Longitudinal Fieldwork Assessment of a Disaster Non-Profit Organization**

**Tomohide Atsumi**

Graduate School of Human Sciences  
Osaka University

and

**James D. Goltz**

California Emergency Management Agency and  
the California Institute of Technology

**Email:** atsumi@hus.osaka-u.ac.jp

*Since the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji (Kobe) Earthquake, Japanese society has become accustomed to the presence of volunteers in the pre- and post-disaster environments, more specifically, in preparedness, response and recovery. The present study draws on the disaster research literature in exploring the social contexts in which groups of Kobe earthquake volunteers converged in January 1995 and formed organizations that continued to respond to national and international disasters during the 15 years that followed the 1995 earthquake. Based on the first author's own longitudinal participant observation at a non-profit organization, the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster (NVNAD), the present study traces the development of the NVNAD over the last 15 years. The study's basic conclusion is that, over the years, organized volunteerism in Japan has witnessed a struggle between the development of formal organizations emphasizing interagency cooperation and coordination of volunteers on one hand and the maintenance of a more affective social support-oriented approach with volunteers being physically and emotionally present to disaster survivors on the other.*

**Keywords:** Earthquake, Disaster volunteers

## **Introduction**

At 5:46 AM on Tuesday, January 17, 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (henceforth called the Kobe earthquake) struck the regions of Hanshin and Awaji Island in Japan, claiming more than 6,400 lives and injuring more than 15,000 in a densely populated urban coastal corridor whose central city is Kobe. In the impacted region, more than 300,000 survivors were displaced from their homes and faced the hardship of finding shelter, food, and water in cold winter weather. Since 1995, Japan has experienced several earthquakes and other disasters culminating in the Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami of March 11, 2011 which claimed the lives of nearly 20,000 people and may prove to be the costliest natural disaster in world history.

Following the Kobe earthquake, volunteers came from all parts of the country to assist survivors and their communities—logging more than one million person-days of activity. Although volunteerism in general has a long history in Japan (Rausch 1998) and there is a long tradition of community-based assistance via neighborhood associations (Taniguchi 2010), the overwhelming number of convergent volunteers in disaster response had never before been experienced. Hence, the year 1995 was named the “renaissance of volunteerism” as well as “first year of the (disaster) volunteer” or “volunteer revolution” (Atsumi 2001; Homma and Deguchi 1996; Yatsuzuka 1999). Many volunteers ceased their activities within a few weeks or months following the earthquake as the immediate and acute needs of the survivors for water, food and shelter were satisfied. Fatigue and the need to resume everyday activities following emergency response were also factors in the demobilization (Nakata 1996; Nishinomiya Volunteer Network 1996). Nevertheless, for some, volunteer service in disasters would become an ongoing activity and organizations that first emerged in the Kobe Earthquake evolved in the direction of institutionalization.

The present paper provides an ethnographic history of an emergent volunteer organization and its evolution into a formally constituted body. This history focuses on the first author’s own long-term fieldwork and participation in a non-profit organization, the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster (NVNAD) established after the Kobe earthquake. We offer an analysis of the NVNAD in the context of the disaster research literature, attempting to address the socio-cultural and political aspects of volunteerism in Japan and concluding with our assessment of the contributions by disaster volunteers to Japanese society over the last 15 years and those likely to be made in the future.

## **Volunteers in Disaster Research**

Volunteerism has been studied from multiple disciplinary perspectives. A recent review of volunteer studies (Hustinx et al. 2010) indicates that volunteering is a complex phenomenon that is not clearly delineated conceptually and spans a wide variety of

activities, organizations, and sectors. After a thorough exploration of previous studies, we developed a conceptual framework consisting of problems of definition, multidisciplinary focus (i.e. economics, sociology, psychology and political science), and multidimensional theory (i.e. theory as explanation, as narrative, and as enlightenment through a critical perspective). According to our assessment of the current state of volunteer studies, the least amount of attention has been paid to the possible impact of the larger socio-cultural context on individual volunteers.

This review by Hustinx and colleagues suggests two issues of relevance to the present study. The first is that disaster volunteering is solely a subset of volunteerism in general such that no special attention to disaster volunteers has been paid in the wider arena of research on volunteers. Second, there are no established theories to interpret the socio-cultural context of volunteerism at this time. Hence, as Hustinx et al. suggest, one possibly fruitful area of investigation is to conduct a longitudinal case study to understand how volunteering itself is undergoing major changes as a consequence of modernization and individualizing trends of recent decades.

In their compilation of natural hazards research, Tierney, Lindell and Perry (2001), note that “volunteer activity increases at the time of disaster impact and remains widespread during the emergency period, particularly in highly damaging and disruptive disaster events” (pp. 111-112). The same authors also comment on the widespread participation of people in volunteer activities that usually consist of “helping with search and rescue activities, providing food and water, assisting with cleanup and debris removal and providing shelter to displaced victims.” (p. 112) Distinctions are also recognized in the disaster research literature between spontaneous volunteers who are, at the time of their volunteer service, unaffiliated with any pre-existing disaster response agency or organization and often have little experience in disaster response, as compared to organized volunteers who represent institutions such as the Red Cross and are likely to have had some prior training in aspects of emergency response. Another component of disaster voluntarism is that volunteers may be survivors of the disaster, thus local to the disaster impact area, and those who are from areas remote from the disaster impacted region.

Although volunteers who converge in great numbers on the disaster scene may return to previous pursuits during or upon the termination of the response period, group formation may occur around the ongoing need for support for victims or other perceived community needs related to the disaster. These “emergent” groups are, according to a typology first developed by Dynes (1970) and reproduced in Tierney, Lindell and Perry’s (2001) compilation of disaster research, Type IV or “newly formed entities that were not part of the pre-disaster community setting” but work on non-routine tasks within the context of a new organizational structure. (p. 115) The other types of organized entities in disasters include established (Type I) or organizations that perform the same tasks in disasters that they perform during non-disaster periods; expanding (Type II)

organizations that tend to be small or relatively inactive during non-disaster periods, but increase in size, change structure and perform tasks for which they are normally responsible; and extending (Type III) organizations that retain their pre-disaster structure but engage in disaster-related tasks that are new.

Groups, including groups of disaster volunteers, emerge in the context of “a legitimizing social setting, a perceived threat, a supportive social climate, pre-existing social ties, and the availability of resources (Quarantelli et al. 1983 as quoted in Tierney, et al, p. 117). Tierney et al (2001, p. 117) add that “repeated exposure to highly damaging events such as hurricanes or earthquakes may also prompt the emergence of ECG’s (emergent citizen groups)”. They state further that “inflexible bureaucratic structures and procedures may result in a failure to meet victim’s needs, leading to conflict and group emergence” (p. 118). Earlier work by Forrest (1968), Ross and Smith (1974), and Ross (1980) attempt to identify stages in which group formation takes place and evolves into a formal organization. These stages include a crisis; a search for meaning; a definition of the situation in which keynoting individuals and opinion leaders play an important role; the development of a consensus around, and commitment to, a course of action; and crystallization in which the group takes on structure and begins interacting with other organizations (organization sets) in its environment. The emergent organization becomes institutionalized when crystallization results in the emergence of “boundary personnel” responsible for external relations with other organizations, with establishment of recognition (both visibility and legitimacy) and acquisition of resources, and finally, when the emergent formal organization achieves a more or less stable state and ongoing relations with other organizations.

More recent work by Wachtendorf and Kendra (2006) and Sutton (2003) points to the importance of improvisation and adaptation in emergent organizations. In her analysis of faith-based organizations in the World Trade Center disaster of September 11, 2001, Sutton identifies adaptive strategies of faith-based organizations, both structural and task-oriented, in which underlying (or latent) goals or objectives of the organizations emerged to meet the needs produced by the disaster. In the case of faith-based organizations responding to the September 11 disaster, the latent mission of “humanitarian aid” became manifest to meet the needs of those in the greater-Manhattan metropolitan area impacted by the attack. Wachtendorf and Kendra (2006) observe “in the very definition of disaster, circumstances have exceeded a community’s ability to cope (which) implies that some form(s) of improvisation will be necessary.” Their examples include the water and airborne search and rescue operation conducted by the US Coast Guard and other civilian boat operators after Hurricane Katrina and a similar evacuation of Lower Manhattan following the attack on the World Trade Center by a convergence of vessels that accomplished the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people. Adaptation and innovation are phenomena that characterize all organizations, including organizations of

disaster volunteers and may appear as emergent elements in existing formal organizations.

### **The Context for Volunteer Convergence and Emergent Group Formation in Japan**

The convergence of volunteers following the Kobe earthquake was not new. Being universal, this convergence has taken place in all of Japan's many natural disasters throughout history. What was new for Japan, and recognized by us and other social scientists, is the size of the convergence drawing volunteers from all parts of Japan, as well as attempts to harness it in organizational forms that could be mobilized in future disasters, both domestic and international. There are statistics that suggest that the 1.4 million volunteers who responded in Kobe in 1995 were followed by the mobilization of 274,600 volunteers who cleaned up oil spilled by a Russian tanker in the Sea of Japan in 1997 (DPCO 2011). In 2004, approximately 65,000 volunteers participated in the response to the Niigata Chuetsu earthquake and more than 116,000 volunteers took part in flood response in various regions of Japan (DPCO 2011). The focus of this paper, however, is not on individual spontaneous volunteers but on one organization, the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster that emerged following the Kobe earthquake and continues to operate, including service in the aftermath of the catastrophic March 11, 2011 East Japan (Tohoku) Earthquake and Tsunami.

The convergence of volunteers following the Kobe Earthquake and the temporary nature of their service seems to fit the DRC Typology as Type IV, Emergent or "newly formed entities that were not part of the pre-disaster community setting." The NVNAD, named for one of the cities impacted by the Kobe Earthquake and a center of volunteer mobilization is one of the emergent groups formed in the aftermath of the 1995 disaster. In this paper, we examine the development and evolution of the initial coalescence of spontaneous volunteers in the Kobe Earthquake into an emergent Type IV organization and its evolution as a Type III organization or one that retains its pre-disaster structure but engages in disaster related tasks that are new. In addition, we discuss the footbath, an innovation or adaptation adopted by the NVNAD, which emerged to meet the affective needs of disaster victims.

Despite the demobilization of most spontaneous volunteers as the Kobe emergency period waned, a subset of volunteers with experiences in Kobe remained active as disaster volunteers in other domestic and even international disaster events (e.g., Atsumi and Okano 2004; Goltz et al. 2001; Kao et al. 2007). Some of these Kobe veteran volunteers became members of the NVNAD as it mobilized and transitioned from an emergent to an on-going formal organization during and following the Kobe Earthquake response. A core leadership group emerged that provided direction and continuity (e.g., Atsumi 2001; Iwasaki 2003; Suwa et al. 2008; Shaw and Goda 2004; Yatsuzuka 2008). Before we present an ethnographic history of the NVNAD as an emergent and later

formal organization of disaster volunteers, we will digress to address the question—why did an unprecedented number of volunteers respond by converging on the disaster impact area of Kobe and the surrounding area?

Several disaster research scholars have pointed out that the Japanese disaster prevention system depends more on governmental agencies do comparable systems in the U.S. (Britton 2006; Suzuki et al. 2003; Tierney and Goltz 1997). Prior the 1995 Kobe earthquake, people in Japan had generally recognized national and local governmental agencies as the main response agents. In fact, government-centered disaster management policies and practices appear to have achieved a dramatic decrease in the number of victims of natural disaster. The most impressive change is in reduction of the death toll; during the 15 years after World War II approximately 40,000 died whereas from 1960 to 1995 about 5,400 perished (Yamori 2007). Although improvements in disaster management should not be evaluated solely by reductions in the death toll, this dramatic decrease was sufficient for most Japanese people to trust the effectiveness of governmental management of disaster. As a result of the dominant role of the government, citizen participation in disaster response was quite low. Accordingly, there have been few studies of disaster volunteers in Japan, focusing on their activities during the response stage of a major emergency (Suzuki et al. 2003).

In the more immediate context of the Kobe Earthquake, two factors may have accounted for the large influx of spontaneous volunteers. One factor is modern mass communications, particularly television coverage of the disaster impact. Japan had not experienced a similarly catastrophic urban earthquake since the mass availability of television in the post-WWII years. Media coverage of the events of January 17, 1995 and the aftermath were extensive and, based on commentary by journalists and interviews with victims, it was clear that government agencies at the national, prefectural, and local levels were overwhelmed by the disaster and that there were unmet needs and suffering. A second factor was the availability of large numbers of young people, mainly students who were on semester break from schools and universities. Finally, as volunteers converged on the disaster impact area from all parts of Japan, the coverage of this large movement of people itself became the subject of news coverage stimulating additional convergence.

Two significant changes may at least partially account for the perpetuation of voluntarism in Japan, including organizations of disaster volunteers; one explanation is institutional and the other is cultural. The national government, acknowledging the contributions of volunteers in the Kobe Earthquake, included disaster volunteers in its master plan and in laws addressing disaster preparedness. Volunteers were, for the first time, recognized as a disaster resource in the revision of the basic disaster prevention plan in July, 1995, and in a major revision of the Basic Act on Disaster Control Measures in December, 1995. The national government established January 17 of every year as Disaster Prevention and Volunteer Day and people have continued to observe the week

that includes January 17 as one that is devoted to special programs that promote disaster preparedness. Further, the Cabinet Office of the national government has appointed a nationwide committee of disaster volunteers, consisting of leaders of disaster volunteer organizations as well as disaster researchers to monitor the activities of disaster volunteers and discuss their future possibilities. As the final example of institutional changes, a new law (i.e., Act on Promotion of Specified Non-profit Activities), which was enacted in 1998, deregulated the establishment of non-profit organizations. This promoted disaster voluntarism because it included disaster related activities as one of the major areas of newly established non-profit organizations.

Beyond institutional recognition of volunteers in disaster, there are indications that they are being incorporated into Japanese culture. In addition to January 17 being designated as Disaster Prevention and Volunteer Day, Yatsuzuka (1999) in his analysis of a national newspaper database, demonstrated that articles including the term “volunteer” and those including the terms “volunteer” and “disaster” steeply increased in 1995. Moreover, his own follow-up study (Yatsuzuka 2007) indicated that the number of articles continued to increase and doubled in the ten years following 1995. Although Krippendorf (1980) has pointed out that media coverage does not fully capture public attitudes toward disaster volunteers, the two are correlated. While many observers and commentators have acknowledged the unexpected appearance of large numbers of disaster volunteers in Kobe in 1995, few researchers have continued to study disaster volunteers with a longitudinal perspective. As a result, there is little research on the long-term movement of disaster volunteers in Japan and additional studies are needed.

### **Methods of Study**

In answering our basic research questions regarding why large numbers of volunteers responded to disasters in Japan and why those volunteers coalesced into ongoing organizations, we rely on the techniques of participant observation. The lead author has served in leadership roles in the NVNAD since its inception immediately following the Kobe Earthquake of January 17, 1995. So, this article is essentially an ethnographic history wherein the author has worked to develop “confessional tales” (Van Maanen 1988) in which what is told is the story of the research itself.

The first author has long taken field notes (Emerson et al. 1995) and preserved data that include records of activities, documents, minutes of meetings, in-depth interviews, and written records in e-mail. These data have been carefully compiled into field note histories with theoretical insights and discussed with the second author. One of these methods of data collection involves a technique that is also an essential element of aid to survivors of a disaster, the footbath.

The footbath is a non-traditional method of interviewing survivors of a community disaster while at the same time providing a valued and appreciated benefit. The footbath

is especially effective in eliciting survivor stories, as young student interviewers bathe the feet of those being interviewed who might otherwise be reluctant to express their emotions and reveal aspects of their experience to non-family or non-community members. The footbath as method of interviewing also serves to overcome status differences between young urban and well educated interviewers and older, rural residents who have experienced the trauma of a disaster. The position of the interviewer kneeling and the act of bathing the feet of the interviewee tends to lessen status differences and encourages verbal interaction.

The ethnographic methods, including the footbath employed in this study reveal a basic assumption that research and disaster assistance can coexist in a collaborative process in which both interests are served. In the remaining sections of this paper, we hope to demonstrate through these ethnographic methods how organizations of Japanese disaster volunteers formed and continue to exist today.

### **An Ethnographic Overview of the 15 Years of Disaster Volunteers in Japan**

Both authors of this paper were present in the Osaka-Kobe Metropolitan area on January 17, 1995 and experienced the earthquake. The first author has conducted long-term participant observation on disaster volunteers and NVNAD. A resident of Nishinomiya City, he was teaching at Kobe University at the time of the earthquake. With serious damage to Kobe University and the cancellation of classes, he volunteered at a shelter and was involved in establishing the NVNAD of which he is currently the president (e.g., Atsumi et al. 1995). It is thus not simply a participant observation upon which this narrative is based, but a collaborative practice with volunteers, staff members, researchers, and survivors. In the following ethnographic narrative, we will describe the emergence of the NVNAD, its expansion and transition from a principal focus on local survivors in Kobe to those in various domestic and international disaster events and from an exclusive commitment to response to a broader range of activities that include recovery and preparedness.

### **From Spontaneous Volunteers to an Emergent Organization**

Beginning on the afternoon of January 17, 1995, volunteers and donated goods converged on the Nishinomiya City Hall and other locations in the area. Nishinomiya city administrators and officers, like others in the impacted region, were struggling to cope with the damage to their homes and communities, and the ordinary functions of the city hall had come to a halt. There was no procedure or protocol for coordinating volunteers because disaster volunteers were not expected, but a hastily organized reception process was set up at city hall largely by volunteers. Volunteers, therefore, coordinated themselves according to their own daily experiences; some relied on procedures and



activities practiced by the Boy Scouts, whereas others introduced techniques used in managing warehouses. Such a state of emergent struggle for order and situational definition prevailed in many places in the city (e.g., shelters at schools), but survivors, neighbors, and volunteers helped each other in whatever ways they were able. A week later, these emergent groups and the city administrators realized that one of the major problems to avoid was the duplication of effort between government and emergent volunteer groups and among volunteer groups themselves. Hence, the dominant emergent group at Nishinomiya City Hall assumed leadership among 13 other emergent groups and established the Nishinomiya Volunteer Network (NVN) on February 1, 1995. The NVN worked closely with the Nishinomiya City government, once it resumed operations, on the distribution of food and goods, gathering of information from official and unofficial shelters, and serving as a liaison between survivors and sections of the city government.

As weeks and months passed following the earthquake, most volunteers ceased their disaster response activities and returned to their own communities whereas some volunteer agencies, including the NVN, remained to manage unmet needs among the survivors. Despite the general demobilization of both spontaneous and organized volunteers, these agencies were able to continue their service with a reduced number of volunteers. The NVN continued to maintain a close and cooperative relationship with the city government. However, it also recognized that the local community-based organizations (e.g., neighborhood associations) had revived and resumed serving their communities following the disaster. Hence, as the intensity of response and the assistance of other organizations reduced the demands on the NVN, its members now had time to discuss their own lessons and make future plans. A critical choice lay between disbanding the NVN and reorganizing it for future domestic and international disaster response.

In the summer of 1995, the NVN sent a delegation to the U.S. to attend a conference of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster to learn about the organization and activities of disaster volunteers in the U.S. and share its own experiences in response to the Kobe Earthquake. Based on information exchanged at the conference and internal discussions among the NVN core leadership, a decision was made to continue activities in Nishinomiya and offer assistance in future disasters with a global perspective. The emergent NVN was reorganized and crystallized as a new organization; the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster (NVNAD) was established on the first anniversary of the Kobe earthquake.

### **Institutionalization, Interaction with Other NGOs and Evolving Mission**

During the five year period between 1995 and 2000, the NVNAD leadership and volunteers gained important experience in responding to a variety of domestic as well as international disasters. They expanded their activities beyond response to include preparedness during periods between response mobilizations. The NVNAD gained

legitimacy through national legislation that recognized the contributions of volunteers and their organizations and incorporated them into official disaster management operations. In addition, this was a time in which volunteer organizations recognized the need for coordinated action among themselves and in which the first efforts to address coordination were made. It was also a time in which the NVNAD recognized that institutionalization brought with it a tendency to adopt bureaucratic forms of organization in which the affective needs of survivors were frequently overlooked.

Disasters during this period—including floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions—provided opportunities for volunteers to gain valuable experience in response to natural hazards. There were man-made disasters as well. On January 2, 1997, more than 3,700 kiloliters of heavy oil were spilled from a Russian tanker that ran aground in the Sea of Japan. The largest number of disaster volunteers since the Kobe earthquake participated in the response to this accident. The NVNAD was quickly activated and sent a staff member to one of the affected towns. At its office in Nishinomiya, NVNAD played the role of an information clearinghouse on the spill and coordinated numerous spontaneous volunteers as well as donated goods. It also helped the affected area to open a reception center for volunteers. In other activations during this period, the NVNAD sent its members to domestic disasters including major floods in 1998, an earthquake and volcanic eruption in 2000 and the international response to earthquakes in Turkey and Taiwan in 1999.

The response of disaster-oriented NGOs in Japan during this period lacked coordination; even organizations with experience in Kobe did not work together under any shared rules or established procedures. In 1997, acknowledging this lack of coordination in disaster response, the Shinsai ga Tsunagu Zenkoku Network or Shin-Tsuna (literally “Network connected by the Earthquake”) was formed incorporating nine organizations that had emerged during and after the Kobe earthquake. The leadership of the NVNAD chose not to affiliate with Shin-Tsuna due to differences in organizational philosophy. In contrast to Shin-Tsuna, whose member organizations deployed volunteers as an integrated team, the NVNAD attempted to establish a network respecting the independence of each member organization (because it is modeled after the NVOAD in the U.S.) emphasizing cooperation, communication, coordination, and collaboration of fully independent non-profit organizations. The NVNAD helped organize and participated in what became known as the Japan Disaster Relief Network (J-Net) established in 1999. The members of J-Net are more than two dozen non-profit organizations scattered across Japan. Some of them are national organizations with many branches and others are local organizations. This second national network shares some features with Shin-Tsuna as both networks aim at maintaining close relationships among organizations for disaster response and is active in non-emergency periods. However, the J-Net is unique in that the network itself is not a unit for disaster response. Instead, each member organization decides whether or not it will participate in particular response

activities. Hence, when a disaster occurs, J-Net member organizations are neither obliged to join in response nor wait for a command. Instead, they are expected to make their own decisions concerning how they will contribute to response activities.

As for the broader social context during this time period, first the national government and subsequently local governments began to recognize the significance of disaster volunteers and revised their master plans to include volunteers in disaster management plans and procedures. The broader society also recognized the significance of volunteers not only for disaster response but also for social welfare, environmental issues, and other critical social issues. As a result, the Act on Promotion of Specified Non-profit Activities was enacted in 1998, including disaster volunteers as part of its mandate. The NVNAD became incorporated under this law as the first non-profit organization in Hyogo Prefecture in 1999.

In parallel with disaster response, the NVNAD became involved in disaster preparedness in local communities during this phase of its development. It created and tested a new program, “Rediscover My Home Town”, in the Nishinomiya and Kobe region (Atsumi et al. 1999; Watanabe 1999). It was an event for children and parents to explore their communities from a perspective that was seemingly unrelated to disaster, such as children’s favorite places and local history. The parents were told beforehand that they were expected to detect some resources for disaster preparedness next to or near local attractions related to their children’s everyday activities (e.g., a fire cistern or police station). Through mapping their findings in the community, both children and parents realized how well (or ill) prepared their community was for disasters.

Cultures within organizations of disaster volunteers in Japan were evolving and differentiating from one another. For some, the primary objective was to develop procedures to allocate volunteers to disaster related tasks in an efficient and coordinated manner to provide victims and survivors with the basic necessities of shelter, food, water, sanitation and other material needs. Other organizations became concerned that the emotional needs of survivors were of paramount importance and oriented their organizations to meeting these needs. This latter organizational culture took hold in the NVNAD.

When the NVNAD dispatched core members, including the first author, to Taiwan after its September 21 (“Chi Chi”) earthquake in 1999, they quickly realized that there was almost nothing they could provide to the survivors because a few large Buddhist organizations were providing basic survival assistance in an efficient manner (Kao et al. 2005). It was obvious that if local people could help each other, outside organizations such as NVNAD had nothing to offer. When the members visited a mountainous village completely destroyed by the earthquake, they encountered a woman survivor with whom they expressed their empathy. After a while, she turned to the members and said “thank you”. This experience made the NVNAD members recall their own experiences immediately after the Kobe earthquake in which volunteers did whatever they could do

for each individual survivor at that time; survivors appreciated not only their activities, but the fact that volunteers were present with them. Although the NVNAD offered some donated goods and helped some families in Taiwan, the idea of “being with the survivors” became its key concept of operation. As a result, the NVNAD gradually lost interest in rapid response such as opening disaster volunteer centers as soon as possible to provide mass care following a disaster.

Consistent with this emerging orientation toward the emotional support for disaster survivors, the NVNAD also recognized the importance of communities’ post-disaster revitalization. The Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake occurred at 5:56pm on October 23, 2004, a few months before the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kobe earthquake. It was not only a major earthquake with more than 60 fatalities, it was also a new phenomenon to those volunteers who were only familiar with disasters in metropolitan areas. The earthquake destroyed many small villages scattered throughout the mountains that had been facing depopulation and aging before the earthquake. Most of the young had left for jobs in urban areas and mainly the elderly remained, cultivating small terraced rice fields and maintaining traditional culture. When the Niigata Chuetsu earthquake hit Shiodani village in Ojiya city, there were 49 families with only 14 children. It was completely isolated due to the shutdown of all routes to other areas and loss of all communication channels. Most of the houses were destroyed and three children were killed. A few years later, only 20 of the 49 families had returned to their village and attempted to recover with the assistance of outside volunteers (Atsumi 2009).

Hence, the disaster response efforts here were different from those in Kobe. Although disaster non-profit organizations initially opened disaster volunteer centers cooperatively with local governments and related organizations and applied the lessons from Kobe (e.g., how to settle in shelters), the major attention soon shifted from the short-term response period to the long-term recovery of each village. While recovery as conceptualized in Japan connotes physical reconstruction, the volunteer organizations, including NVNAD prefer to call this phase “revitalization” which emphasizes cultural and social, as well as physical, recovery.

The NVNAD dispatched members to Niigata Prefecture on the day after the earthquake and has continued to be involved in its revitalization process. After helping open one of the volunteer centers for disaster volunteers, the NVNAD opened its own local office in cooperation with other non-profit organizations in J-Net’s nationwide network. Some of the student volunteers began to visit the mountainous villages and joined in local events and traditional festivals (Suwa et al. 2008). For example, they were invited to help local farmers plant rice in a traditional way, join villagers in a traditional summer dance, and assist with snow removal from homes in winter. Through these activities, the student volunteers learned about societal issues of depopulation, modernization, industrialization, and aging, as well as traditional Japanese mountain cultures and human relationships. These activities were part of the new orientation

toward revitalization adopted by the NVNAD and contributed to long-term support of the survivors.

From the viewpoint of the NVNAD, this earthquake response experience was critical in that it recalled experiences in Kobe (i.e., direct contact with the survivors) and extended disaster volunteer activities to recovery and revitalization in its specific meaning to local communities. Revitalization then became one of the major foci of disaster volunteers and participating disaster survivors' everyday activities, as well as their special events, became both popular among students (Miyamoto and Atsumi 2009a; b) and a new direction for the NVNAD.

### **Attending to the Emotional Needs of Survivors: Emergence of the Footbath**

Niigata Prefecture was once again hit by an earthquake on July 16, 2007, a M6.8 event that caused 10 deaths, 1,339 injuries and \$5 billion in damage. Experienced volunteers and leaders of disaster non-profit organizations met in Kariwa Village at the local headquarters of the Council of Social Welfare to teach effective methods of disaster response management to local volunteers. These local volunteers were expected to manage the volunteer center though they themselves were victims of the disaster (i.e., many of them and their family members were at shelters), and little provision had been made for addressing their emotional needs or those of their families. The NVNAD once again confronted the struggle between coordinating the disaster response and focusing on the individual survivors. The NVNAD leadership agreed that volunteer activities themselves should not be a goal of disaster response and recovery but, instead, a means for helping survivors. However, establishing and operating the disaster volunteer center became the purpose of this response effort at the expense of meaningful contact with individual survivors.

To address this anomaly regarding the desire of volunteers to provide meaningful assistance to victims, including those who were also local volunteers, the idea of providing a footbath emerged. Student volunteers from Kobe, Osaka, and Niigata formed a team called the *Chuetsu-Kobe Footbath Team* and provided footbaths at shelters and temporary housing in villages affected by the 2007 Chuetsu earthquake. Volunteers from Kobe and Niigata learned this technique and, more importantly, the spirit and meaning of the footbath from the Osaka University student volunteers. The footbath, which is a popular form of therapy in traditional eastern medicine, was adapted for use in disaster by Masamichi Yoshitubaki, an official in a non-profit organization based in Kobe. The technique was first implemented following the Kobe Earthquake in 1995 when Yoshitubaki taught student volunteers from Kobe and Osaka Universities to use the technique, some of whom became NVNAD activists and instructed others in its use.

A footbath does not just relax people physically by putting their feet in warm water for 15 to 20 minutes; it is also a tool for communication between survivors and

volunteers. While providing a footbath, a volunteer may ask an elderly person how she evacuated from the village. In return, the elderly survivor may talk about his or her grandchildren to the volunteer. Without the footbath, it would be very strange and difficult for student volunteers to start such communications because they are from outside the community. Likewise, outside the context of the footbath, it would be very rare for local residents to have such a conversation with strangers. Especially after major life events such as disasters, people would like to have someone to listen to their stories. Once they have an opportunity to talk and to be listened to, they are likely to be comforted. Of course, if volunteers detect any serious problems (e.g., mental health issues) through discussions during the footbath, they are expected to report them to local leaders. Otherwise, conversation records are shared among volunteers and used for training and future response and recovery activities. Although some may consider the footbath concept an inefficient means of supporting disaster survivors, experience with this technique has shown that there is a reciprocity that emerges in which social barriers are removed from communication between young urban volunteers and disaster victims. In addition, the victims receive emotional support in a physically relaxing environment that allows them to verbalize their experiences and volunteers, many of whom are veterans of the Kobe Earthquake, can mobilize their experience as volunteers in a new way.

Members of the NVNAD reflected on their experiences in Taiwan, the two Chuetsu earthquakes, and other disasters and concluded that every individual survivor should receive intensive personal attention. By 2009, the organization had abandoned the single-minded focus on effective coordination of volunteers and, based on the experience of disaster response in the Chuetsu earthquakes, decisively led the organization to focus on the survivors' emotional recovery instead of the emergency response organization's efficiency. The NVNAD now returned to the original survivor-centered approach and the long-term perspective for reconstruction that characterized response to the Kobe earthquake. During this period, it also became equipped with a special tool for directly engaging the survivors, the footbath.

Although the Kobe, Chuetsu and other disasters to which the NVNAD responded were very significant in their impacts on local populations and infrastructure, the events of March 11, 2011, exceeded these disasters by several orders of magnitude. The Great East Japan (Tōhoku) Earthquake and Tsunami claimed the lives of 20,000 people, devastated 600 km of coastland, caused the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986, and may prove to be the costliest natural disaster in history. The NVNAD mobilized on the day of the event by collecting donations and, by March 17, had agreed on a course of action. This plan included an ongoing effort to assure a steady stream of support through fundraising, to focus on small towns and villages in Iwate Prefecture that tended to be overlooked by larger NGOs, and assist Fukushima evacuees in finding shelter and temporary housing outside the nuclear disaster restricted zone. Approximately

320 volunteers were recruited both from Nishinomiya and other parts of Japan, drawing well-experienced disaster volunteers from Kobe and Niigata Prefectures. Many of these had been survivors of the 1995, 2004 and 2007 earthquake disasters. The main focus of volunteer activity was Noda Village, a town of 4,500 people located at the northern extreme of the disaster zone that experienced 38 fatalities and lost 500 homes. Volunteer activities there included provision of food, clothing, bedding and other supplies, but greater emphasis was placed on survivor mental health and the preservation of community as exemplified in such activities as the footbath; collection, preservation, and (as needed) restoration of family photos recovered from the disaster; and sponsoring community events (e.g., hosting parties, promoting recreation, and facilitating survivor participation in local festivals).

In addition to the assistance provided to the several hundred survivors in temporary housing in Noda Village, the NVNAD also assisted those required to evacuate the area around the badly damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility. Two towns in Niigata prefecture (adjacent to Fukushima Prefecture), Ojiya City and Kariwa Village, both of which were impacted by the two earthquakes in the Chuetsu region in 2004 and 2007 and the focus of NVNAD volunteer activities, accommodated approximately 800 Fukushima evacuees. Temporary shelters were opened, but in Ojiya City 200 families volunteered to shelter evacuees in their homes. In addition, the NVNAD sponsored and provided transportation for Chuetsu-Oki Earthquake survivors to visit Noda Village as mentors and peer counselors (a process the NVNAD leadership referred to as “survivor relay”). In interviews conducted with volunteers who had survived earlier disasters, most said of this reciprocity that they had been helped following disasters in their communities and it was now time for them to assist others (Atsumi, 2011). These activities are ongoing with a consistent emphasis, first adopted following Taiwan’s 1999 Chi Chi Earthquake, upon “being with the survivor”, as well as preserving community and collective memories of the event as part of local culture.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The renaissance of volunteerism in Japan was not a temporary boom, as it has remained stable since 1995 and continues today. We have described the development of the NVNAD as an emergent organization in the Kobe earthquake, identified its crystallization as a formal organization of disaster volunteers, documented its transition from an exclusively response organization to one that emphasizes preparedness and revitalization, and noted how it changed its orientation from the coordination of volunteers to addressing the emotional needs of survivors through techniques such as the footbath. These developments occurred in the context of a growing body of disaster experience on the part of a core leadership that included the first author as a long-term participant and eventually president of the organization. The key experiences in the

development of the NVNAD, particularly its emphasis on the affective well-being of disaster victims were obtained in an international disaster response, Taiwan's 1999 Chi Chi Earthquake, and two domestic events, the Niigata Chuetsu Earthquakes of 2004 and 2007.

The experiences of transition from a more institutionalized form of volunteer service, that of coordinating services for disaster survivors, to an orientation toward emotional support deserves special mention in the context of the disaster research literature. The recognition that many, if not most, disaster volunteer organizations in Japan after the Kobe Earthquake inadequately addressed the emotional needs of survivors gave rise to an emergent norm within the NVNAD. This norm both acknowledged the deficit in emotional care for survivors and called for a method to address it. It also reminded the NVNAD leadership of the original spirit at the time of the Kobe Earthquake response when, as an emergent group prior to its formalization as the NVNAD, it had been mobilized around attending to the individual needs of survivors. This emergent norm was actualized in the formation of the footbath concept, which is now an established part of all NVNAD response to disasters in Japan.

Consistent with the dominant orientation of serving the emotional needs of disaster survivors, the NVNAD expanded its efforts following the March 11, 2011 disaster by recruiting and mobilizing dedicated volunteers who were already participants in mature disaster subcultures within Japan (Kobe, Nishinomiya and Chuetsu) to assist newly impacted disaster survivors in Noda village and the evacuees from Fukushima. This adaptation has addressed the issue of "volunteer burnout" through survivor reciprocity and is likely to become an important factor in future disaster volunteer mobilizations as well as the creation and perpetuation of a wider disaster culture in Japan. Currently, the NVNAD can be classified as an extending volunteer organization, one that retains its pre-disaster structure but engages in disaster-related tasks that are new. We mentioned earlier that the NVNAD carried out preparedness and community revitalization tasks when not engaged in a disaster response. In doing so, the orientation toward community preservation and focus on community residents (rather than government agencies or private sector organizations) is consistent with the overall "grass roots" philosophy of the NVNAD.

What is the significance and what contributions will disaster volunteers make to Japanese society? Sugiman (2010) suggested, based on Ohsawa's theory (Ohsawa 1990), that students who served as volunteers in Kobe were different from those who participated in the student movement in the 60s and 70s because they did not act on the basis of ideals or ideology. Instead, their motivation was empathic, simply to help the survivors. He suggested that the volunteer movement would save Japanese society from both extreme individualism and from simply returning to its traditional collectivism. The current work by disaster volunteers (e.g., footbath) exemplifies and supports this idea. During the footbath, volunteers spend time together with survivors sharing both physical



contact and dialogue. The direct contact is likely to lead volunteers to form strong social and emotional bonds with those they are trying to help. In other words, by intense interaction with survivors, volunteers may feel that they are now helping others as well as themselves and experience the stimulating reality of this reciprocity without having ideals and ideology as their motivation. It is perhaps the starting point for establishing a new social norm.

In conclusion, disaster voluntarism since the 1995 Kobe Earthquake and the more than 15 years of its development described in this study have perhaps given us a glimpse of the future of Japanese society—one characterized by empathy and community regarding values to counteract the individualism and alienation fostered by urban life of the post-World war II era. The most obvious expression of this emerging ethos is the footbath, which establishes an emotional and physical connection between one individual and another. It implies that the next era may be characterized by a more direct and engaging relationship with others. Although social networking (e.g., Facebook) may connect us electronically, connecting directly with each other in everyday life in Japan or in the U.S. is more challenging (e.g., Putnam 2000).

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