

Stories & Facts from Fukushima

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A Case Story

Six years after the nuclear accident: Evacuees from Fukushima and the continuing friction

Toshiyuki Takeuchi and Emiko Fujioka



Sachiko Sawagami at the office of Ehime 311 (right) ©Fukuden

Memories evoked by smell and sound

“When I hear something breaking or hear a siren, I get afraid. When I smell the sea, the memory of tsunami comes back,” utters Sachiko Sawagami, even as she currently lives more than 1,000km from Fukushima in Matsuyama-city, Ehime prefecture. She evacuated to this place, which is her hometown, from Futaba-machi, a town on the Pacific Ocean coastline of Fukushima prefecture. Here, she continues doing activities that support evacuees who were affected by the nuclear power plant accident six years ago.

Consultation Desk

Due to the nuclear accident, many people who were concerned about radiation damage have evacuated to places in Japan (and at times overseas) that were thought to be free from radioactive contamination. The evacuees were not limited to residents in Fukushima where the accident took place. They included many people from Tokyo that more than 200km away as well from other places in the Eastern region. People who evacuated their home to places outside their prefectures are referred to as “wide-area evacuees”.

A not-for-profit organization called Ehime 311, which supports such evacuees, was established on May 24, 2012, in Matsuyama city, Ehime prefecture. Sawagami was involved in the set-up of the organization as an executive. She is also an evacuee from Futaba-machi, Fukushima prefecture. From April 2016, Fukushima prefectural government has set up consultation desks around the country to support evacuees from the prefecture. Ehime 311 had started consultation service since 2012 by themselves, and now assume a role as one of the consultation desks provided by Fukushima prefecture. Today, after six years on from the nuclear accident, many wide-area evacuees are considering settling down in where they evacuated to.

Kibbutz

Until high school, Sawagami grew up in Matsuyama city in Shikoku region. As a daughter of a family running an electrical appliance store, she was far removed from anything related to agriculture. After graduating from high school, she started working at a local department store. She just wanted to try anything that came her way, and she was particularly attracted to the idea of going overseas. When searching for information about traveling abroad, her eyes fell on ‘Israel,’ which was at the top of the book list according to the Japanese syllabary order. It was not that she had a particular interest in Israel. At the destination, there were young people from many countries on the kibbutz, including a few from Japan. She met her husband there. He came from Futaba-machi, Fukushima prefecture. She had her first taste of farming experience when participating in the kibbutz. Whereas farming was something so foreign to her in Japan, she felt strongly attracted to the farming experience in the kibbutz.

✕Kibbutz

Kibbutz is a collective communal settlement. It was founded by Jewish people who fled from persecution across the world before the state of Israel was established. The lifestyle based on ideal principles of cooperative society has attracted youth from around the world. It is closely associated with the Zionist movement (Jewish nationalist movement), and many kibbutzim are found close to the “national border.” As such, it made an easy target for attacks related to the Israel-Palestine conflict.



A city tram in Matsuyama city



*Life in Futaba-machi before the nuclear accident
Photo provided by Sachiko Sawagami*

The farming experiences in kibbutz brought her closer to her husband who came from a farming background in Futaba-machi. She married him and moved to Futaba-machi. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant station was located between the borders of two towns: Futaba-machi and Ōkuma-machi. Majority of town residents worked for Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and its related companies - it was that kind of place.

Futaba-machi

In Futaba-machi, Sawagami served as an employee on a social welfare council, working as a helper and a consultant to people with special needs and the elderly as well as delivering meals. Her husband came from an eighth-generation family farm. From the beginning of their married life, they started off living with a big family. Along with the kibbutz experience, Sawagami enjoyed leading a farming life with her big family. Her life was filled with happiness. In Futaba, the main farming product was rice.

In their new year greeting postcard, there was a photo of the family lining up in front of their newly bought farming tractor. It was for the new year just before the earthquake hit. At the time, her husband felt so happy; in fact, too happy that he somehow felt it might not last that long.

Hit by the disaster

When the earthquake hit, Sawagami was working on the first floor of the workplace. The office was in a complete mess. The second level was a daycare center, and there were about 60 clients. The building shook so violently that people felt their lives were in danger. Worried about whether to stay indoors, she went outside. The loud sounds and smells are etched in her memory. She was so nervous, she remembers how inside her mouth became dry, and there was bitter taste on her tongue. Even outside, the cars in the car park and many other things were scattered.

Although the social welfare council's building had three levels, seeing the approaching tsunami, she thought that the sea would swallow it. Fortunately, tsunami damage could be avoided.

That day was a school graduation day, and the disaster hit many children. She saw fire brigade teams bringing in people who were taken by the tsunami but were somehow rescued. Swallowed by the winter sea, their mouths and ears were covered with sea sand. The snow was falling, and it was cold, but people trembled because they had no spare clothes.

The following day, due to the nuclear power plant accident, an evacuation instruction was released, and the town residents began to evacuate. Residents of Futaba-machi were to evacuate to Kawamata-machi. Many buses arrived and departed.

People who were left behind

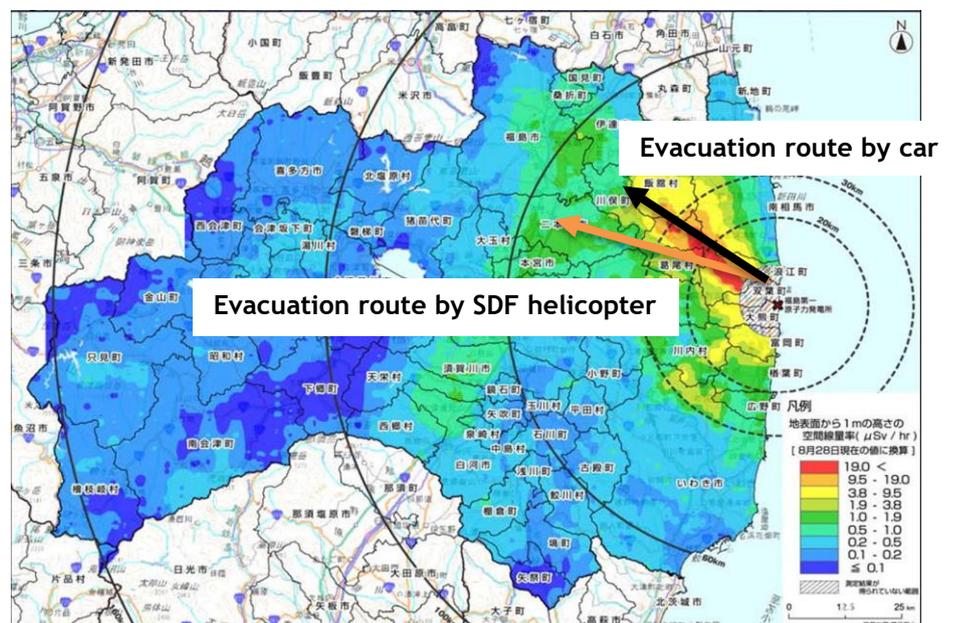
Some people were left behind. They included the users and staff of the workplace's daycare service, the users and staff of the special elderly nursing home Sendan, which was located opposite the workplace, and the patients and staff of the psychiatry ward of Futaba hospital. The latter were transported to Nihonmatsu-city's public facility by the self-defence troop's helicopter. She heard about the nuclear power plant accident on the radio in the car. Through the town's wireless-activated disaster warning system, a message was broadcast to stay indoors, to stay away from the windows, and to stay in the center of the room.

The staff of the hospital must have had some knowledge about the nuclear accident, as they were putting bath towels around the patients. They must have understood the dangers of radiation exposure and prioritized the patients. Sawagami and others remained in a queue wearing short-sleeved white clothes. Some people were crying. The municipal officers were wearing protective clothes and masks. The lay people had nothing and were putting on blankets and overall coats. Her father-in-law was working at TEPCO and had some knowledge, so he remained calm and was always concerned about the wind direction.

Her father-in-law, who had worked in a nuclear power plant-related job, recommended her to evacuate. She then made up her mind to do so.

Friction and division surrounding people affected by the disaster

Last year in 2016, there were series of news about bullying and harassment against evacuees from Fukushima prefecture. The disaster-affected people and evacuees have been fixed into certain images; portrayed as pitiful people.



Based on an image on the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry website, which shows air dose rate of 1 m height from the ground surface as of Aug.28, 2011.



A temporary housing complex in Fukushima city for evacuees from the coastal area

©Kristian Laemmle-Ruff

When they behave in ways that do not fit into such images, backlashes take place. The environment that the nuclear accident created, in which the disaster-affected people are placed, is extremely diverse and complex. Each person's circumstances are significantly different according to the conditions of the damages as well as individual's contexts, and its complexity cannot be easily understood. For many people in Japan, disaster-affected people and evacuees are seen through a simplistic and monolithic lens, and there is inadequate understanding of the fact that each circumstance is different.

"It's true that the 'voluntary evacuees' are in the very tough situation," Sawagami said in serious tone. "Fukushima will become a gloomy place if the people who return there are only those who are forced to do so as they cannot continue evacuation because of financial reason. It will be great if there is support for the people who cannot go home soon but hope to return there someday."

The people who formerly resided in areas that were subject to compulsory evacuation including Futaba-machi where Sawagami previously lived are receiving compensation money, so that they can live without financial struggles so far. However, when faced with circumstances of voluntary evacuees, there is a feeling of guilt for some reason. There is a sense that it would be good if there were some support for voluntary evacuees also. However, at the same time, there is also a sense that it would not be good to continue residence support forever.

Considering what she has lost, it is not that compensation money appears much. However, when thinking about the voluntary evacuees' situations, one cannot feel but sorry for them. There are many voluntary evacuees, especially mother-child evacuees who bear twofold burdens, who are in high financial needs. At the consultation desks, there are cases when these people are linked, not to evacuees' support, but to general support for the poor and needy. However, some staffs at the consultation desks have little understanding of the complicated evacuation situation, and they make simple advice to go back to where they came from. As a result, people end up coming back to evacuees' support entities like Ehime 311.

Society's distortion caused by lack of understanding ruins children's hearts

As an evacuee from the compulsory evacuation zone, Sawagami receives compensation money. When thinking that everyone around her knows about this, there is hesitation towards doing a big shopping. At times, she finds herself wrestling with obsessive thinking that compensation money should be returned for the common good. In actual reality, however, no amount of compensation money can ever buy back the house and the land in Futabamachi where she once lived. There is no way back to her old way of life.

“The voluntary evacuees are struggling in different ways. They are told: ‘you escaped out of your own will and decision.’ What is common is the lack of understanding from the people around. In fact, it is a human rights problem.”

There are certain unspoken social expectations, such as self-regulating to live “like evacuees” and leading certain lifestyles that appear modest, pitiful and needy to suit the image of disaster-affected people and evacuees. Such atmosphere in the society is impacting upon children's worlds.

Take for example the children who do not want to participate in evacuation drills. They do not like to be told: “You've already experienced it in Fukushima, haven't you?”

Once, amidst being told various things about compensation from people living in the place she evacuated to, she responded by explaining her household finances. After telling them in detail what she has lost and what the compensation covers, some understanding could be reached.

Disaster-affected people who are exhausted by unreasonable criticisms

Such social frictions and divisions are not unique to today's nuclear accident context. History shows that similar problems have come about over compensation issues about health damages caused by environmental pollution. Considering the mass-scale destruction brought about by the nuclear accident, it is evident that its social impact is enormously incomparable. Regardless of the government's evacuation instructions, the social and economic losses of evacuation have become significant.

Today, the compensation comes from TEPCO, which is the entity that is directly responsible for this accident. However, the government that has been promoting nuclear energy at the policy level is also responsible, and it is supporting the compensation by investing public money (tax money) to TEPCO. Given that compensation for these losses is covered indirectly by public money, there is a need for the government to give clear explanations to its public and commit to resolving unhelpful misunderstandings. Considering the above, TEPCO and the government, and the ways in which they handled the disaster, are mostly responsible for today's social frictions and divisions in the aftermath of the nuclear accident.

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Background Facts

Significant difference of support for evacuees depending on where they are from

According to “White Paper on Nuclear Power Plant Evacuation (Genpatsu Hinan Hakusho) ¹”, the disaster-affected people and evacuees of the Fukushima nuclear accident are grouped according to the places they evacuated from in the following seven categories:

- A) Difficult-to-return zone
- B) Restricted residence area
- C) Zone in preparation for the lifting of the evacuation order
- D) ① Specific spots recommended for evacuations
 - ② Emergency evacuation preparation zone
 - ③ Indoor evacuation zone
 - ④ Part of Minamisōma-city
- E) Voluntary evacuation zone
- F) Half-of-compensation-cost area
- G) Zone with no applicable category (areas that are not included in above mentioned zone categories)

Roughly speaking, evacuees from A to D categories receive ‘evacuation consolation money’ of about 100,000 yen² per person per month (for areas in category D, the compensation money stopped in 2012). Regarding category A, since it is an area that is difficult to return to, 15 months after the disaster, people from there have received an upfront five-year worth of compensation money, which was 6 million yen (total 7.5 million yen). Also, they received another 7 million yen as a sum to compensate for the loss of livelihood and impossibility to return.

To compensate for private buildings and lands, categories A to C received full, half and third of estimated value respectively. As for category D, despite the advice from the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Center, TEPCO is refusing to compensate.

When residents of areas E to G evacuate, they are known as “voluntary evacuees.” Evacuees from area E have received ‘evacuation consolation money plus increasing living costs’: pregnant women and children have each received 400,000 yen (600,000 yen, if evacuated) + additional 80,000 yen + miscellaneous 40,000 yen; and other residents have only received 80,000 yen + miscellaneous 40,000 yen per person. Evacuees from area F who are pregnant women or children have each received half the amount of 200,000 yen and 40,000 yen.

Residents and voluntary evacuees from area G have not received any compensation. Moreover, it was accepted that every evacuee would have either emergency temporary housing or rental support (minashi kasetsu) in which private rental housing would be used as temporary housing (areas E, F and G only had minashi kasetsu rental support).

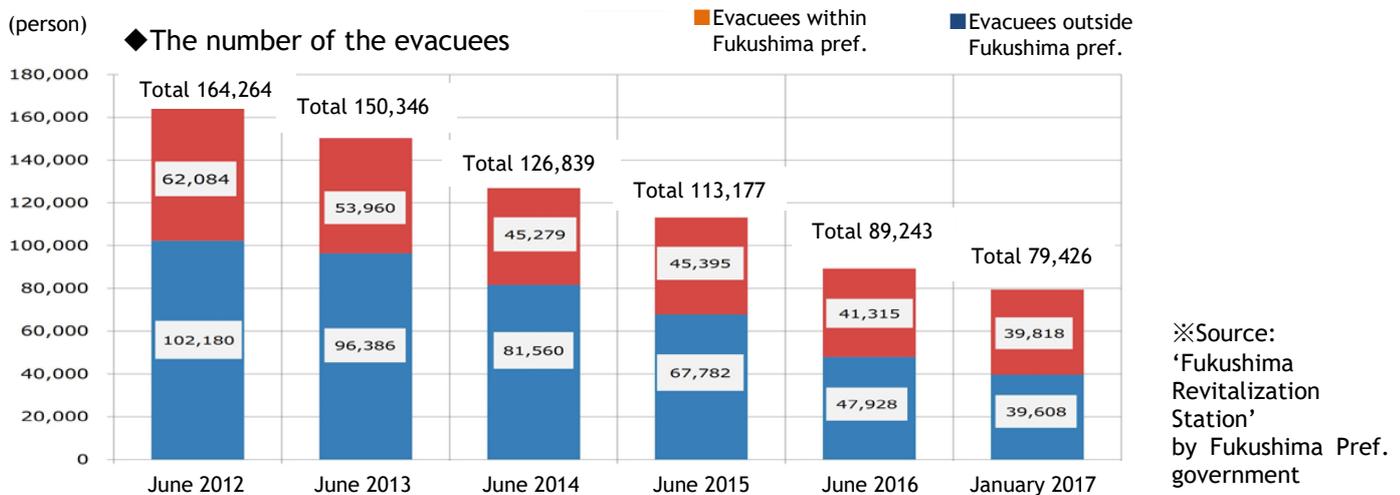
There are cases whereby the local municipalities that are accepting evacuees offer support, separately from the support provided by the Fukushima prefecture and the state. Other than the unemployment compensation was applied to those who took break from work or became unemployed due to evacuation. The duration of support could be extended according to consideration of each case.

1. published by the Kwansei Gakuin University Institute for the Research of Disaster Areas Reconstruction and two civil society organizations in 2015

2. 1000yen ≒ 9USD

Background Facts

80,000 evacuees from Fukushima still living away from home



According to the announcement of Fukushima prefectural government as of March 6, 2017, around 80,000 people are still living away from their home. Though the number has been reduced to less than half of the peak in May 2012, still more than 12,000 people are living in inconvenient temporary housing and the toll of “disaster related death,” caused by stress, exhaustion, and worsening of pre-existing illnesses due to evacuation, has reached up to 2,131.

Besides, it was found out that more than 24,000 people who had been evacuated from evacuation zone are excluded from the official numbers of the evacuees, as Fukushima prefecture do not count the people who rebuilt houses in the area where they are evacuated or shifted from temporary housing to public restoration housing as evacuees.

As such, there are thousands of “hidden” evacuees who do not appear in the statistics.

About this newsletter

Stories & Facts from Fukushima is a newsletter presenting real stories of Fukushima and its background after the nuclear disaster of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant happened in Mar.11, 2011.

Having more than 6 years passed since the disaster, this newsletter aims to introduce present situation of Fukushima people (both living inside and outside Fukushima) and to explain the facts behind their life.

Some of the contents are linked to our website, Fukushima on the Globe (www.fukushimaonthe-globe.com). Please see the site as well as this newsletter.

We welcome your feedback.

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