Childcare support in the Great East Japan Earthquake disaster areas in relation to the declining birthrate

1. Situation regarding children in the Great East Japan Earthquake

The Great East Japan Earthquake occurred in March 11, 2011 causing an unprecedented damage. The number of dead people who were recovered and subjected to an autopsy in the most damage-stricken 3 prefectures of Iwate Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture and Fukushima Prefecture was 15,824 people as of February 29, 2016, and the number of identified people was 15,749 people, while children in the ages of 0 to 9 years were 468 and those in the ages of 10 to 19 were 425. Of children who lost their parents in the earthquake, 241 children were orphaned (94 in Iwate Prefecture, 126 in Miyagi Prefecture, and 21 in Fukushima Prefecture) and 1,514 children lost both parents (488 in Iwate Prefecture, 871 in Miyagi Prefecture, and 155 in Fukushima Prefecture) (as of March 1, 2014).

Moreover, the number of children who were transferred from schools in areas severely affected by the earthquake of Iwate Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture and Fukushima Prefecture is 19,522. The breakdown of the types of schools and the number of children are 1,513 children of kindergarten, 264 children of nursery centers, 11,078 children of elementary school, 5,306 children of junior high school, 1,190 children of high school, 21 children of secondary school, 150 children of special needs education schools (as of May 1, 2015), including all national, municipal and private schools and including the number of transferred children from schools of the same prefecture). Of 19,522 children, 10,271 children of Iwate Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture and Fukushima Prefecture were transferred to schools in other prefectures; 284 children from Iwate Prefecture, 1,258 children from Miyagi Prefecture and 8,729 children from Fukushima Prefecture (as of May 1, 2015, including all national, municipal and private schools). In addition, 941 kindergartens, 3,269 elementary schools, 1,700 junior high schools, 7 secondary schools and 186 special needs education schools sustained physical damage (as of September 14, 2012).

2. Efforts to deal with children and child-rearing in areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake

1) Promotion of support to children based on the Comprehensive Disaster Victims Support Measures (Health and Livelihood Support)

In the task force consisting of bureau-chief-level members of relevant ministries with the Minister for Reconstruction as the chairman, the “Comprehensive Disaster Victims Support Measures (Health and Livelihood Support)” was formulated on January 23, 2015. In the Comprehensive Measures, as one of the main support instruments to children affected by the disaster in a variety of manners, a variety of support services are provided to children, including the provision of a comprehensive support to children affected by the disaster from the “Comprehensive Subsidy to Support Victims’ Health and Livelihood” and the implementation of continuous efforts for the mental health care and learning support.

2) Efforts to create “New Tohoku”

Before the earthquake, the Tohoku region had a variety of problems including population decline, aging, hollowing out of industry, etc. For this reason, efforts are underway to create “New Tohoku” which may serve as a model for Japan and other countries in the world by not only recovering simply to the previous state, but also by overcoming these problems in the wake of the reconstruction from the earthquake disaster. Specifically, the “New Tohoku” leading model project designed to support the acceleration of pioneering efforts by a wide variety of people from companies, universities and NPOs among others was implemented (the project was terminated at the end of FY 2015).
In the disaster-stricken areas, problems have arisen, such as that children play less outdoors, people suffer from stress due to the change in livelihood circumstances, etc. In order to solve these problems, it is important to push forward the creation of a secure society in which energetic and healthy children can grow through the creation of places where children can stay and play (playgrounds and sporting grounds) and through the development of human resources capable of helping children grow from both the physical and mental perspectives. In a project of the “New Tohoku” leading model project of FY 2015, in order to expand the activity to create children’s playgrounds to a variety of areas as a sustainable effort, efforts that contribute to the rehabilitation of local communities are being made, such as the creation of playgrounds by making use of a shared space in public restoration housing and of playgrounds by making use of agricultural environment.

3. Cases of support for child-rearing in areas affected by the disaster

In areas affected by the disaster of the Great East Japan Earthquake, local governments, Specified Nonprofit Corporations and volunteer organizations are providing continued support to children and parents with children.

<Efforts, such as child-rearing support circle (Iwate Prefecture)>

[Emergency support in inland areas] The Specified Nonprofit Corporation Iwate Child Raising Net (currently, the NPO Iwate Child Raising Net at Morioka, Iwate Prefecture) launched support services to accommodate newborn babies, mothers and families that had been hit by the earthquake in coastal areas and lost their houses on March 14, 2011. In order to safeguard babies born in the disaster-stricken areas and the mind and body of mothers in postpartum period, the organization prepared an accommodation facility (Sancerre Morioka) with a function to serve as a postpartum care center (allowing a stay for a week), and 2 pairs of mother and baby were transferred for the first time from the Prefectural Miyako Hospital on March 17 in the same year to the facility. With a midwife in a standby status, breastfeeding training, bathing training and childcare training were provided. An obstetrician, a pediatrician and a child psychiatrist also joined and it was encouraging that measures could be provided as necessary.

In addition, for the purposes of creating a safe and secure livelihood environment for newborn babies and mothers and providing childcare support to mothers and households, a livelihood support was provided in an apartment house in Morioka city for a month. Since these supports were provided by sharing information with the prefectural government of Iwate Prefecture and the municipal government of Morioka city, temporary accommodation of pregnant women and newborn babies in specialized facilities in inland areas was rapidly provided. In addition, the municipal government of Hanamaki city and other organizations supported the initiative.

[Rehabilitation of places for communication and exchange as well as playgrounds] The burden of child-raising households (parents and children) in the disaster-stricken areas increased significantly compared to normal time. In addition, with the collapse of the child-rearing support system in the areas, there was a fear that child-rearing households would be more isolated. In the circumstances, the Child-Rearing Support Center that played a central role among local child-rearing support facilities in Iwate Prefecture held “Demae Poko Poko” in 21 disaster-stricken coastal areas from June 2011 to March 2012 with the participation of a total of 922 people, where a variety of games and amusement were provided for children and a “place for communication and exchange” to share information was provided. In addition, the personnel of the Center delivered stationary necessary for childcare practice and handmade toys sent from support centers in inland areas and supported activities of local child-rearing support facilities in disaster-stricken areas, such as the development of child-rearing supporters, etc.

In addition, the “Iwate Child Raising Net” held the event called “The playground is coming!” at Miyako, Kamaishi and Ofunato in response to the needs that an opportunity should be provided in which both parents and children could expand and throw themselves whole-heartedly into playing. At the same time, a place where parents with worries about child-rearing gathered and talked was provided, and a class to improve skills to rear children with confidence was provided to parents in Morioka, Ofunato and Kuji areas. It was also an aim of the event to build a network and to remove anxieties from parents about child-rearing
and lack of friends to consult with close to them.

[It is the life for children to play]
Many of children evacuated from the disaster-stricken areas to Morioka city did not know what to do with their time and were stressed living in no spacious apartments. In addition, fewer playgrounds were available in Morioka in the winter season and the number of opportunities to play also decreased. In the circumstances, the “Iwate Child Raising Net” installed and operated an indoor playground called “Kid’s gym JUMP” donated by a company in the center of Morioka city from December 17, 2011 to March 20, 2012 to enable children to have a good sweat, relieve their stress accumulated after the earthquake and eliminate a lack of exercise during the winter season.

Large playground equipment with which to play indoors whole-heartedly and gymnastic apparatus, such as the horizontal bar, the balance beam etc were installed, and a class on gymnastic apparatus including the horizontal bar was given as necessary. In addition, excursions including transfer from disaster-stricken coastal areas were accepted. Morioka city moved the event to other place and the running of the event was commissioned to a third party for a period of three years from FY 2012.

Since no playground or no playing opportunity was available in coastal areas, there was a concern about the state of children, such as the decrease in their physical strength, increase in obesity, stress and others. By accumulating skills of exercising while playing through the activities at the “Kid’s gym JUMP,” services focused on exercising while playing were provided to children in 12 municipalities in disaster-stricken coastal areas from FY 2012 in order to release the contracted mind and body. Simultaneously, child-rearing supporters for “exercising while playing” were cultivated in the local communities in order to increase the opportunities for children to make exercise while playing.

(Aspect of the effort in Iwate Prefecture)

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<Efforts on mental health care of preschool children (Miyagi Prefecture)>

Children’s mental health care in the Hanshin-Awaji Great Earthquake was provided mainly by the education sector to school children and it is reported that the support to preschool children was not necessarily sufficient. Based on the precedent, Miyagi Prefecture recognized the importance of mental health care of preschool children from the beginning of the earthquake disaster and addressed the problem, accordingly.

We present here the “Expert Dispatch Service” and “Play Make Service” from a variety of efforts for the purpose.

The “Expert Dispatch Service” is designed to understand the support needs through the outreach method and dispatch experts such as a clinical psychotherapist to provide consultation to childcare takers and teachers of kindergartens. At the beginning of the services, the number of calls for support was not many, presumably due to the fact that nursery houses etc could not care about other things. Through the building of trust relationship based on repeated visits and an increase in the number of uneasy children, however, the number of their visits gradually increased. In FY 2015, a total of 369 places were visited.

The “Play Make Service” is designed to provide children severely affected by a trauma with “comfort” and “power” through “play.” In this activity, many tools such as a parachute, a cushion ball, a scarf, a puppet and others are used in combination according to the interest of children at the moment. When this activity was provided, children were asked to draw a portrait (of the same person) at the beginning and at the end of the activity to check their change. It happened that there was unevenness in their drawing ability among facilities and their levels were not such that any change could be appreciated. It also happened, however that a variety of changes were appreciated, such as an addition to the drawing, the larger drawing, use of more colors and the like. Although the importance of “play” was shared in the past in places in which preschool children lived, what happened actually was to “let them simply play,” It can be said that the importance of “play” and the power brought about by a play was recognized again, and the fact that play and play make with which children performed resulted very effective, precisely because the event was held after the Great East Japan Earthquake which had left a huge impact on children.

(Aspect of the effort in Miyagi Prefecture)
Even today, there are many reports that classes of the first grade and second grade of elementary schools in which children affected by the disaster are enrolled are restless. It cannot be said that this is due necessarily to the earthquake, but it cannot be said either that this is not so. In addition, there are also reports of restless children born after the earthquake affected by economically and mentally unstable parents who were hit by the earthquake. Despite that five years have passed since the earthquake disaster, mental health care needs to be promoted continuously. It will be necessary to review the content of support and provide an adequate support according to the situation at the time.

"Journalist School” to learn about the hometown “Fukushima” (Fukushima Prefecture) >
The "Journalist School” which marks the third year is designed so that children of Fukushima collect news materials about the current situation and problems of local areas for the reconstruction, think about the current situation and future of Fukushima through newspaper making and issue a newspaper to transmit the information. It is the aim to provide children opportunities to exercise their sensitivity and cultivate their love to their hometown “Fukushima.”

In this occasion, the event was held in the Aizu region between July 22 and 24, 2015 and a total of 33 children consisting of 21 elementary school students, 10 middle school students and two high school students participated. A university professor was invited as the lecturer to teach the children about how to collect materials and write the news. The lecturer learned the content of the news from children and gave them detailed guidance on the importance of having a clear idea about what to transmit to readers and of conveying the idea in concrete terms.

In addition, the lecturer also answered questions made by the children including the reason why he aimed to be a journalist and hardships in his youth among other themes, and talked about the importance of “informing facts in an accurate and easy-to-understand manner, thinking on one’s own and analyzing.”

(Making of a newspaper by the children)
Under the guidance of a teacher who served as an adviser of the newspaper club of a prefectural high school and a newspaper journalist, the children discussed how to write an article for the collected news materials and arrange it in the newspaper, and how to choose a photograph from many photographs taken to facilitate the understanding of readers in the most effective manner. All the children shared the work to write the article and exchanged their ideas and opinions about the name of the newspaper, its large heading and small heading. In order to make as better a newspaper as possible, they were in earnest; they asked themselves how to inform in an easy-to-understand manner, they wished that many people read the newspaper, and they wondered whether right terms were used, etc.
They were heard saying that they were anxious about reading the finished newspaper as soon as possible. When the newspaper came out of the printer, children beamed with joy and cheered wildly.

[Impressions of the children]

- I understood through collecting news materials and newspaper making that there are still many people in the Aizu region who are making a lot of efforts. I will also do my best from now onward. (Elementary school girl in the 5th grade)

- I had a good experience in collecting news materials on site, writing an article on my own and finishing it off. In addition, it was a good opportunity to interact with friends who participated in the event from various parts of the prefecture. (Middle school girl in the 2nd grade)

- I could learn to wrap up things and I became more interested in newspaper. (Middle school boy in the 3rd grade)