



# Disaster Recovery and Youth, Peace and Security: Examining the Project, “The SOKA Global Action”

*A Thematic Paper for the Progress Study on Youth, Peace and Security*

Prepared by the Soka Gakkai International

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## Introduction

In March 2011, the northeast region of Japan known as Tohoku<sup>1</sup> was hit by a natural disaster of enormous magnitude: The Great East Japan Earthquake. The 9.0-magnitude earthquake, coupled with numerous aftershocks, a series of highly destructive tsunami waves and a nuclear reactor accident,<sup>2</sup> claimed thousands of lives, while causing lasting damage to the surrounding communities and survivors of the atrocity. Even today, more than six years later, many continue to live in temporary housing and endure ongoing uncertainty about the future.

The suffering this event engendered, including deaths, loss of loved ones and assets, and economic stagnation, forced many young people in Japan to re-examine their values and ways of life.



*A local band performs at a temporary housing unit in Miyagi Prefecture (2011)*

Against this backdrop, and coupled with other socio-political factors affecting people’s sense of

<sup>1</sup> The Tohoku region is the northeastern part of the largest island (Honshu) of Japan, and consists of six prefectures: Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi and Yamagata.

<sup>2</sup> The nuclear power plant accident has made the situation more complex, posing serious security and safety challenges including threats to people’s health and food production. Some evacuees are uncertain if they can ever return to their homes or where they will live in the future. Many have been faced with discrimination due to radiation. Some experts also point out the complexity of this disaster, including a study by Louise K. Comfort, Aya Okada, and Gunes Ertana, “Networks of Action in Catastrophic Events: The 11 March 2011 Tohoku-Oki Disasters,” *Earthquake Spectra*, Volume 29, No. S1, S387–S402, March 2013.



peace and security, youth members of the Soka Gakkai, a community-based Buddhist association in Japan,<sup>3</sup> launched a new campaign called the SOKA Global Action (SGA)<sup>4</sup> in 2014. The core activities of the SGA aim to promote awareness and understanding through dialogue to advance the following three themes:

1. Build a culture of peace and a world free of nuclear weapons
2. Strengthen ties of friendship in Asia through dialogue and cultural exchanges
3. Support post-disaster reconstruction efforts after the Great East Japan Earthquake

Under the framework of the SGA, young people are organizing events and activities related to those three themes throughout Japan. The three themes are broad in nature, demonstrating the multiple perceptions of “security” among young people in the country.

Although post-disaster reconstruction efforts are not often associated with peace and security, there have been approaches linking natural disasters with peace and security.<sup>5</sup> Some suggest the need to recognize natural disasters as part of national security threats, especially in the wake of hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and other forms of natural catastrophes that increase vulnerability and instability in communities.<sup>6</sup> Futamura et al (2011) suggest using the lens of human security to better understand and respond to the threats natural disasters pose to human safety and well-being. They write:

...the actual threats that people struggle with following a natural disaster are similar to those of a human-made crisis such as armed conflict: “fear” (such as aftershocks and deteriorating social order) and “want” (lack of food, water and shelter). Likewise, many of the same actors are involved in the response, notably the UN and humanitarian NGOs. Indeed, most of the

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<sup>3</sup> The Soka Gakkai is a part of the Soka Gakkai International, a global movement of Buddhists dedicated to peace with practitioners in 192 countries and territories. For more information, see: <http://www.sgi.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> More information about the campaign is available in Japanese at: <http://www.sokayouth.jp/sga.html>.

<sup>5</sup> As examples of studies examining the linkage between disasters and security, see: SDSN Youth, *Impact of Climate Change on Youth, Peace and Security* (August 2017), and United States Institute of Peace, *Natural Disasters as Threats to Peace* (February 2013).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see: Steve Cohen, “Disaster Recovery And Reconstruction Is A National Security Issue,” Huffington Post (5 September 2017): [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/disaster-recovery-and-reconstruction-as-a-national\\_us\\_59ae99f8e4b0bef3378cdb21](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/disaster-recovery-and-reconstruction-as-a-national_us_59ae99f8e4b0bef3378cdb21).



organizations involved in natural disaster relief are working to protect human security, even if they don't label their work as such.<sup>7</sup>

The SGA campaign, which was initially focused on post-disaster recovery activities in the Tohoku region, has since expanded to other areas hit by severe disasters, notably southwest Japan, where the Kumamoto Earthquake of April 2016 forced thousands of people to evacuate, including many who continue to live in uncertainty today.

Using the example of the SGA, and particularly the third theme on post-disaster recovery efforts,<sup>8</sup> this paper will review youth contributions to peacebuilding in Japan, and analyze how the framework of Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) could be applied to understanding and evaluating youth contributions to peace and security beyond the country. While not experiencing armed conflict, Japanese youth face various challenges that relate to their sense of peace and security as mentioned above, and earthquakes and natural disasters are among their top concerns. For instance, a survey of high school students conducted by the National Institution for Youth Education in Japan shows that 55.3% of the respondents were looking at “natural disasters such as earthquakes or hurricanes” as an issue of interest related to safety.<sup>9</sup> Efforts to lay the foundations for sustainable peace in Japan thus need to reflect its unique national context. And as other countries face similar conditions, the conclusions may be useful for them as well. With this in mind, this paper aims at fulfilling the following objectives:

- To examine the impact of natural disasters in the broader context of peace and security, and in particular their impact on young people;
- To highlight tangible activities conducted by youth in Japan to contribute to post-disaster recovery following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake;

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<sup>7</sup> Madoka Futamura, et al, “Natural Disasters and Human Security,” *United Nations University* (29 April 2011): <https://unu.edu/publications/articles/natural-disasters-and-human-security.html>.

<sup>8</sup> For youth contribution to nuclear disarmament, see SGI's thematic paper entitled *The Role of Youth in Nuclear Disarmament: Examining the Project, “The People's Decade for Nuclear Abolition.”*

<sup>9</sup> The responses were collected from 1832 students from 17 high schools across 10 prefectures in Japan. In this particular question, respondents were asked to choose up to 3 safety issues they are interested in from the list of 11 items. For more details about the study, see: [http://www.niye.go.jp/kenkyu\\_houkoku/contents/detail/i/108/](http://www.niye.go.jp/kenkyu_houkoku/contents/detail/i/108/) [Japanese].



- To advance knowledge of how the framework of Youth, Peace and Security can be applied to the context of youth post-disaster recovery in Japan.

## Methodology

This paper analyzes largely three categories of “evidence” in examining youth contribution to disaster recovery – and to security – in Japan. First, it surveys various youth-led activities conducted under the theme of post-disaster recovery within the SGA. The examples of activities demonstrate what young people can do to tangibly contribute to post-disaster recovery, particularly in an aspect that youth often call the “recovery of the spirit.”

Second, the paper provides an in-depth qualitative analysis of narratives provided by youth and those who were impacted by youth activities, including the earthquake survivors and local community leaders. This analysis draws on texts from activity evaluation forms and personal accounts and stories featured in SGI publications, as well as letters of appreciation from the communities. Such texts were collected by the Soka Gakkai’s Office of Peace and Global Issues in Tokyo through archive search and email correspondence.

Last, an informal interview was conducted in May 2017 with 3 chorus members who visited the affected areas on 10 occasions. The interviewees were aged 23, 25 and 32.

## Natural Disasters and Youth, Peace and Security in Japan

Natural disasters dramatically impact people’s lives. Young people, because of concerns and priorities that are characteristic of their age groups, may face unique challenges. The catastrophic devastation and prolonged recovery processes generate uncertainties about the future. They compromise education and employment opportunities for youth. Some are forced to evacuate their hometowns, or choose to move to larger, unfamiliar cities. In the case of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the radiation concerns triggered by the nuclear power plant accident have raised legitimate concerns about its health effects. More broadly, social and economic instability after disasters can trigger family discord and stress. These factors also



affect young people’s well-being and emotional health throughout the post-disaster recovery and reconstruction period. In Iwaki City, Fukushima, one of the areas severely affected by the earthquake, the city’s youth council issued a proposal on addressing emotional and psychological stress and creating a safe environment to support youth well-being and prevent youth and adolescent crimes, bullying and other youth-related issues.

On the positive side, studies also point out that disasters remind people of the importance of human connection with others. Symbolizing this, in December 2011 the Japanese Kanji Proficiency Society through a national ballot in Japan selected kizuna (絆; a character for “bonds”) as the Chinese character of the year. The Economic and Social Research Institute of the Government of Japan Cabinet Office also found that young people are increasingly valuing connections with others. According to a disaster awareness survey conducted by the student members of the Tohoku Soka Gakkai in the summer of 2011, 45% of the student respondents noted that what gave them hope was “bonds with others” and “people’s kindness.”

In addition, the earthquake inspired a number of youth-led initiatives. The same survey found that more than 60% of the student respondents reported they took some action such as volunteering following the disaster. At the same time, some youth reported that they did not know what steps to take in order to volunteer or contribute to the recovery process, leading to their inaction. The result indicates that young people are not unwilling to contribute, but effective information and tools will help boost their actions.

### **Evidence of Youth Contributions to Disaster Recovery in Japan**

The three categories of “evidence” described in the Methodology section are analyzed in the current section of the paper. Below the highlights of SGA activities and emerging themes are discussed. Where possible the emerging themes are connected with the five pillars of the landmark Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security.

A wide range of activities have been organized under the banner of the SGA to support the post-disaster recovery of people in Tohoku, demonstrating various forms of “participation.”

Examples<sup>10</sup> include the following:

- **“Bonds of Hope” Concerts:** The Soka Gakkai youth division’s award-winning orchestra, drum and brass corps as well as the men’s chorus have volunteered to hold more than 100 concerts for Tohoku survivors. While some were held in performance halls, others were organized in more intimate settings such as meeting rooms of temporary housing units.
- **Sharing personal stories:** Soka Gakkai youth organized events in the cities of Kamaishi, Ishinomaki and Iwaki where youth could share their personal accounts of surviving the disaster and their hopes for future reconstruction. These gatherings also took place in four other cities including Kobe, where the residents had successfully rebuilt their communities after the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake. The youth from Kobe shared their experiences with the participants from Tohoku. These exchanges created a sense of solidarity between the survivors of Tohoku earthquake and those who had survived other past disasters, engendering hope.
- **Collecting survivor testimonies:** The Youth Division of Soka Gakkai in Tohoku has conducted interviews with the disaster survivors in order to preserve and share the lessons with future generations. In March 2016, the group published a book titled “March 11, 2011 – More Than Survival: Messages to Our Children,” which contains nine testimonies and their English translations.



*Chorus performance in Yoshima, Fukushima Prefecture*

<sup>10</sup> More information about the activities are available in Japanese at:  
<http://www.sokanet.jp/pr/touhokufukkou/future/#future02>.



- **Disaster awareness surveys:** Student members of the Soka Gakkai in the Tohoku region have conducted an annual disaster awareness survey since 2011.<sup>11</sup> In 2015, it was conducted in Tokyo Metropolitan area as well.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Soka Gakkai youth of the Shikoku region<sup>13</sup> have conducted a similar survey every year since 2012.<sup>14</sup> They conduct these surveys to promote individual awareness and preparedness for potential disasters in the future, as well as with the hope that the information collected will be useful to national and local government agencies involved in planning. The latest survey, conducted between December 2016 and January 2017 in Shikoku region, had 5,361 responses, with more than half of the respondents in their twenties and thirties.<sup>15</sup>

### 1. Need for long-term support

While large-scale disasters, whether natural catastrophes or conflicts, attract attention from around the country and the world, as time passes assistance and support often dwindle.

According to the 2017 Disaster Awareness Survey conducted by the Shikoku Soka Gakkai youth mentioned above, more respondents compared to previous years expressed the view that people have forgotten about the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. Among all respondents, 24.8% felt that declined awareness and interest cannot be helped (an increase compared to 21.5% in 2016), and this feeling was shared more widely among those under the age of 19 compared to other age groups.

However, recovery and reintegration processes often take years, and new challenges and issues emerge among those affected and displaced. Mr. Genzo Suda, chair of a temporary housing resident association in Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture, shared his reflections after the Soka Gakkai chorus performed for the residents in 2015:

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<sup>11</sup> Seikyo Shimbun, 14 September 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1 April 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Shikoku is the smallest of the four main islands of Japan, consisting of four prefectures: Ehime, Kagawa, Kochi, Tokushima. This region is faced with a serious concern of a huge earthquake and tsunami.

<sup>14</sup> All survey results in Japanese are available at: <http://www.shikoku-soka.jp/青年部-青年部2>.

<sup>15</sup> Soka Gakkai Shikoku Youth Division, *The Sixth Disaster Awareness Survey* (March 2017): <http://www.shikoku-soka.jp/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/0c57d2feee0d74887cb01e864b884773.pdf> [Japanese].



[The “temporary” housing keeps being extended, and residents are uncertain about the future].... Now is the time we can really use the support. In the beginning people came from all over Japan to help. After a year, you see half the amount of support. The year after, it’s only one-third. But we are facing various problems now. And we need people who will share joyous moments with us. Some of our residents cry in solitude. Some cannot sleep at night. This is the time we need helping hands. You can only imagine how delighted everyone was to welcome the chorus members here.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, prolonged social and financial instability can have tremendous impact on the emotional health and well-being of those impacted by disasters. Many survivors who join the concerts share this point in their thank-you letters (see Point 5: Providing hope for the communities). Activities that address this concern are critical in post-disaster recovery, yet they are often overlooked. Mr. Suda also stressed this point: “In the beginning we needed food and other materials; now we need emotional support.”

## **2. Intergenerational connections and partnerships**

In the communities affected by the earthquake and tsunami, the declining number of youth and families with children has become a serious concern. Young people relocate to outside communities and urban areas for better educational and employment opportunities. Some local authorities promote policies to attract youth and young families to their areas, without much success. In Mr. Suda’s temporary housing complex, the majority of the residents are elderly. Some live by themselves. He states, “Without the emotional support at this stage, the older survivors will not be able to move forward. They are just waiting to die. If we want them to stand up, we need to support them to look forward.”

Youth who engage intensely in the SGA activities note that most of the people they encounter in post-disaster recovery activities are older, and they are visibly excited to interact with the younger generation. A chorus member (male, 32 years old) who has been to the affected areas 10 times in the last six years, stated: “Most survivors living in those affected

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<sup>16</sup> *Seikyo Shimbun*, 17 June 2014.





areas are older. Just by seeing young people come visit, they are delighted. I feel we are the source of their vitality.” Similarly, the survivor testimonies collected by the youth of Tohoku were mostly from older generations. The survivors recalled that through sharing a story with young people they were able to reflect and organize their memories. They also appreciated that their stories are now published in writing and can be passed on to their children.

### **3. Challenging the support ‘provider-recipient’ divide**

The orchestra and chorus members reflected that they performed with the attitude that they were involved in reconstruction together with survivors, instead of merely offering musical performances. One performer (male, 27 years old) noted that he was unsure how to prepare himself for the performance and was overwhelmed just by thinking of the hardships endured by the survivors. The band leader told the team, “You do not have to feel bad for them. The best thing to do is to offer a performance full of energy.”<sup>17</sup> Mr. Suda, the temporary housing resident association chair, noted that this was what impressed him the most about the concert: “The performers were enjoying themselves with the audience rather than showing off their skills... The one-sided assistance from those helping to those being helped creates a wall. If they just do what they want, it actually burdens the people who are receiving the support.”

The performers made an extra effort to make the concerts interactive, and chose popular and traditional songs familiar to different generations. The musicians personally welcomed the audience at the entrance before the concerts began. During the concert, some volunteers from the audience were selected to act as the conductor, bringing out smiles and laughter amongst many present. One concert participant in Ishinomaki City recalled that the concert happened to be on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the band performed “Happy Birthday” for him.<sup>18</sup>

Mr. Noriko Kanno, village chief of Iitake Village in Fukushima, who attended a concert, also noted that the nuclear power plant accident has posed a serious challenge to the recovery process:

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<sup>17</sup> A performer survey conducted in 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Personal letter dated 4 November 2014.



Only a small portion of our residents will return to the village once the evacuation is over. In that sense we are not starting from zero; we are starting toward zero. At such a time, what is most needed are connections of the heart, where one puts him or herself in another's shoes and shares both joys and sorrows. I believe songs play a critical role in that process. After the disaster, three songs were born within our village.<sup>19</sup>

On the other side of the equation, youth often reported that they were inspired by the experience of performing for the disaster survivors:

- There were various kinds of people in the audience – some cheerful, some quiet. But as we performed I observed their expressions brightened. Some were crying. Seeing that, my heart became full and truly they gave me so much nourishment. (male, 26 years old).
- The temporary housing units were in an isolated area. Their windows looked too thin for the harsh winter. I felt my “problems” are so small compared to theirs. I was encouraged by the people of Tohoku [rather than encouraging them]. (male, 24 years old)<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. Providing spaces for connecting and sharing stories:

Most of the experiences shared by the young speakers at the SGA events were not tales of dramatic achievements; they were honest and candid accounts of their fears and struggles, as



*A youth speaker at an SGA forum.*

well as their gradual effort to rebuild their lives. These sincere stories inspired and touched many people's hearts. The survivors who attended the events later commented that hearing the youth share their experiences enabled them to restore their pride in their own communities. While youth volunteers coming from outside

<sup>19</sup> *Seikyo Shimbun*, 12 March 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Comments were collected through a performer survey in 2014.



communities may feel they do not have much to offer, this need not limit their impact. To this point, again Mr. Suda states: “I know they don’t have answers to our problems, like the future of our temporary housing. But that is completely fine. There is no need to agonize over trying to provide solutions. Rather, please just agonize with us. That is the most important.”

##### **5. Providing hope for the communities**

Many of the concert performers said that they were initially unsure if they could offer anything to the disaster victims. However, through their performances they became convinced of the power of music to heal and empower people. In one of the affected areas, individuals inspired by the concerts formed a men’s chorus group themselves to harness the power of music to help their community. On another occasion, an audience member shared that he had been planning to close his business, but after attending the concert he decided to give it another chance.<sup>21</sup>

Many survivors who join the concerts expressed similar sentiments, writing in their thank-you letters that they felt “hopeful”:

- “I am sure there were many people like myself who cannot see hope in the future and are facing anxieties in the day-to-day living. I believe your performance has given the flame of hope to many of them.”<sup>22</sup>
- “I had thought that I was over the shock of the disaster. I thought I was completely okay. But as I listened to the songs, I was swept away by emotions, thinking about those who passed away, those still missing, and my day-to-day survival filled with fear and anxiety. I could not stop my tears, nor could my friend who came with me. As the performance went on, there were some funny moments, too, and I felt my spirit lift up. By the time it finished, my heart was completely full with hope and strength.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Personal letter dated 8 February 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Comment from a concert attendee from Fukushima (female, 55 years old).



- “I heard the song called ‘Mother’ for the first time, and I could not help but cry. I lost my mother at the age of two, so I have strong feeling for her. During the Great East Japan Earthquake, my house was swept away by the tsunami, and I lost all of her pictures. The chorus members’ voices brought out my memories and images of her, which I had cherished in my heart. To be honest, recovery is still ongoing, and I feel the journey is long. Many days I am filled with anxiousness and pain. But remembering your songs, I will keep advancing. Thank you for the sincere gift of songs.”<sup>24</sup>

As one performer states: “We now know that our concerts can have decisive impacts on the audience. We remind ourselves of this before the trip, have serious discussions about how to make the concert the best it could be, and prepare ourselves thoroughly.” (male, 25 years old)

## Recommendations

Based on the above findings, this section will provide actionable recommendations related to youth and post-disaster recovery. The recommendations relate to youth living in communities affected by disasters, as well as youth who participate in disaster relief and post-disaster recovery activities, some of whom might be from other communities. The recommendations can be applied in a wide range of settings to ensure youth can make a meaningful contribution to peace and security, including post-conflict recovery processes:

### 1. Participation:

- Include youth in discussions around disaster risk reduction and recovery at local and national levels, particularly keeping in mind their impact on young people’s sense of security.
- Provide opportunities for young people, both from the affected areas and outside, to participate in recovery efforts.

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<sup>24</sup> Comment from a concert attendee from Miyagi (female, 75 years old).



- Support schools and universities so that they can provide volunteer activity programs and learning clusters in the affected areas.
- Support companies to initiate policies for employees to take the paid leave for volunteer activities.

## **2. Prevention & Protection:**

- Provide disaster prevention and risk reduction education to youth in school and community settings.
- Expand social media tools with disaster-related information, with youth as the main target audience.

## **3. Partnerships:**

- Encourage local governments and community organizations to foster partnerships with youth groups, music and other performance units and art organizations.

## **4. Reintegration:**

- Address needs of young people in disaster recovery processes, including access to education, employment and providing emotional health support.
- Provide spaces where young people can express their anxieties, frustrations and vulnerabilities and receive support from their peers.
- Encourage youth who are not directly affected to participate in relief and recovery efforts for their own growth and development, and to do so with an attitude of partnership rather than pity.
- Take into consideration ways to retain youth living in the affected areas in the recovery policy making process.

## **Conclusion**

As the example of youth contributions in disaster recovery shows, the YPS agenda can be applied in a broader notion of peace and security, acknowledging the complex factors that may affect young people's security, safety and well-being. Young people have unique roles in



disaster risk reduction and recovery, and their contributions should be acknowledged and encouraged in the context of youth, peace and security. In the preparation phase, they can raise awareness among those who tend to be left behind in a general DRR policies, through their connections with families and friends and via social media. In the relief activity phase, youth can participate in support activities in shelters and outdoors. In the recovery phase, interactions with young people help older generations regain vitality. An example from a city called Kamaishi in Iwate Prefecture, where school children took the initiative to respond quickly and evacuate others in a manner that helped save thousands of lives, shows that effective disaster prevention education among youth is critical to mitigation.

Daniel Aldrich points out the importance of social capital in the context of disasters. He finds that communities with richer social capital (i.e., robust social networks) are able to save more lives and recover more quickly. Youth, with their innovative skills and ability to connect with others, have a lot to offer in building resilient communities. Their presence and support can be particularly inspirational to members of older generations, who also face unique challenges in disasters and recovery processes.

Contributing to rebuilding communities after disasters, in return, offers positive experiences to young people. Youth participating in SGA often recalled being inspired by the resilience of affected communities, and gaining a fresh outlook in life. The experience offers an opportunity for young people to deepen their sense of interconnectedness with others. Many youth gain pride in their communities, and develop the desire to serve others. In this sense, promoting and supporting youth contributions to peace and security – tailored to the concerns and needs of each national context – will help foster resilient communities, leading to more sustainable peace and greater security. ■

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