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# Bringing People Together: Assessing the Impact of 3/11 on US-Japan Grassroots Exchange



ATSUKO GEIGER





# **Bringing People Together**

Assessing the Impact of 3/11 on  
US-Japan Grassroots Exchange

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### **Japan Center for International Exchange**

The Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan policy institute that works to encourage deeper international cooperation in responding to regional and global challenges. Operating with offices in Tokyo and New York, JCIE sponsors policy research and dialogue on cutting-edge issues in international relations, leadership exchanges, and initiatives to strengthen the contributions of civil society to domestic and international governance.

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On the cover: (Left) JCIE Congressional Staff Exchange delegation meets with members of a community gardening initiative in Kamaishi (photo: Jim Gannon); (Right) students from Del Norte High School in Crescent City, California, join a student from Takata High School to help make soup at the school's temporary facility in Ofunato, Iwate (photo: Kyodo via AP Images); in the background, an image of Rikuzentakata shows the devastation left in the wake of the tsunami (photo: Jim Gannon).

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## INTRODUCTION

AFTER JAPAN'S TOHOKU REGION WAS DEVASTATED IN MARCH 2011 BY a massive earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, there was an extraordinary outpouring of sympathy and goodwill across the United States. Americans donated at least \$737 million<sup>1</sup> for relief and recovery efforts for the disaster that came to be known simply as "3/11," and memorials and rallies were held throughout the country to show solidarity with Japan. To a great extent, this was a manifestation of the web of grassroots ties that had been nurtured over the years through a broad range of personal interactions among the peoples of the two countries. The depth of these ties came as a surprise to many. But there was one more surprise. To a degree that had not been seen in the past, the disaster seemed to trigger a flurry of US-Japan grassroots exchanges centered on disaster-related themes.

Of course, grassroots exchange between the United States and Japan has a long history. It was more than a century ago, for example, that 3,000 cherry trees were presented as a gift from the city of Tokyo to Washington DC. The beautiful trees planted along the Tidal Basin in 1912 quickly gave rise to an annual cherry blossom festival and become symbolic both of the city itself and of US-Japan friendship. In the 1920s, amidst growing tensions over Japanese immigration in California, Japanese and American children exchanged dolls. More than 12,000 dolls were sent to Japan in 1927, where they were warmly received by towns and schools throughout the country. In return, Japanese children donated money to have 58 Japanese dolls made and sent to the United States, where they were displayed in libraries and museums. Many of those dolls survived the difficult years of World War II, being hidden away in attics and closets so that they would not be found and destroyed as dolls from the enemy. After the war, they were cherished as a symbol of the long-standing friendship between the two countries. Looking back on such history, it is not surprising that Japan has more sister cities in the United States than in any other country, connecting people in nearly 400 cities.<sup>2</sup>

Building on these preexisting ties and efforts to bring people of the two countries together, the 3/11 disaster led to the emergence, revival, and refocusing of a number of grassroots exchange programs between the United States and Japan. Research conducted by the study team identified at least 151 exchange

initiatives that were carried out between 2011 and 2014 with a thematic focus related to 3/11, a little over half of which were brand new programs. This was in part made possible by the resources that became available thanks to the outpouring of donations and funds after the disaster. But more importantly, 3/11 also brought a new dimension to grassroots exchange between the two countries: unlike past grassroots exchanges that focused on cross-cultural experiences or learning a new language, the exchanges related to 3/11 tend to be aimed more at helping people and communities affected by the disaster. In the context of post-3/11 Tohoku, international exchanges are playing a number of roles: they are a way to inspire students living and studying in a challenging environment to dream big and see their future possibilities; they allow Americans affected by past catastrophic events to visit Tohoku to listen to survivors' stories

and share their own experiences, hoping to bring comfort; and they bring together leaders of non-profit organizations (NPOs) in the two countries to exchange their visions, ideas, and knowledge so that they can better contribute to the recovery and reconstruction of their respective communities.

This report presents an analysis of the state of grassroots exchange programs in relation to 3/11 based on a survey, research, and interviews conducted by JCIE in 2014. While the scope of the study may be somewhat limited as it relies on information that we were able to collect in a relatively short timeframe through our own networks and an online survey, we hope that it provides a general overview of the current state of grassroots exchange and serves as a preliminary step to assess the impact of the disaster on the state of US-Japan grassroots exchange and to explore the implications for broader US-Japan relations.



## TYPES OF EXCHANGE PROGRAMS EMERGING AFTER 3/11

JCIE'S RESEARCH IDENTIFIED 151 PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES AND Japan that have a component of grassroots exchange and that had some connection to the 3/11 disaster.<sup>3</sup> These include traditional grassroots exchange programs, such as homestay programs, as well as other events such as tree-planting projects or film screenings. We then reviewed each program more closely with a focus on the length of the program (e.g., the length of stay in each other's country), the program content, and the number of years that the program has been implemented or is planned to be implemented. Out of those 151 programs, we found 107 programs that promote a more intensive level of people-to-people interaction and that were aimed at building sustainable ties among participants. This includes 83 new programs that started after the 3/11 disaster.

While all of these exchange programs have some connection to the 3/11 disaster, they vary widely in their scope, size, and focus. On the one hand, there are large-scale, government-sponsored projects that involve thousands of participants traveling between the two countries. On the other hand, there are many small programs that involve only a handful of participants and that have been organized on an ad hoc basis, drawing on the personal networks of the organizers. It is possible to categorize these exchanges as belonging to at least four clusters: student/educational exchanges, sister-city programs, exchanges with the theme of civil society or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and exchanges among communities affected by disasters. These four categories are not comprehensive, and not all programs surveyed in the research can neatly fit into one category or the other. However, classifying them in this way can help us understand the overall trends as well as the new and unique aspects of exchange programs after the disaster.

### **Student/Educational Exchange**

The most immediate effect of 3/11 in the field of educational exchange was the disruption of many of the study abroad programs that bring American

and Japanese students to each other's countries. The impact of the disaster, and especially the fear that persisted surrounding the nuclear crisis, led many American universities to cancel their programs in Japan for Summer/Fall 2011, and to bring home their students who were studying there in Spring 2011. There were also reports of some Japanese students from the Tohoku region returning home to support their families through the tragedy.

According to the Institute of International Education's Open Doors survey, the number of American students studying at Japanese universities had increased steadily for nine consecutive years until the disaster, but then it plunged 33 percent from 6,166 students to 4,134 during 2011. It took three years for the numbers to climb back to nearly the level they were before the disaster. Meanwhile, the number of Japanese students studying in the United States showed less of a change. Although there was a 6.2 percent drop to 19,966 students for the 2011–2012 US academic year, that was in keeping with overall trend, which had seen Japanese students studying in the United States fall from roughly 46,000 in the early 2000s. However, officials at the Institute of International Education were so concerned about Japanese students from the affected region having to

withdraw from US universities for financial reasons that they created an innovative fund immediately after 3/11 to provide emergency grants to allow students from the disaster zone to stay in the United States to complete their studies.<sup>7</sup>

A few months after the disaster, though, there was also a noticeable upsurge in student exchange programs that had some relation to 3/11. Out of 83 new exchange programs that this study has identified as starting after the disaster, at least 55 were programs that targeted students. Those programs bring Japanese students from the Tohoku disaster zone to the United States, giving them an opportunity to experience life and culture outside of their everyday lives, which have been filled with challenges and constraints since the disaster. For American students who travel to Tohoku, these programs provide them with an opportunity to see and learn about Japan, and about the resilience of people who have survived a major disaster.

The Kizuna Project (*kizuna* means “bonds,” as in bonds of friendship) sponsored by the Japanese government was the largest program of this type. In 2012 and 2013, over 1,000 students from the areas affected by the disaster visited the United States. About 1,200 American students were also invited to visit Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, and Ibaraki Prefectures.

### Research Methodology

JCIE carried out an initial online survey of US-Japan grassroots exchange programs from May to June 2014. At the preliminary stage, the English and Japanese websites of relevant programs were identified through an online search.<sup>4</sup>

A more focused search was then conducted in the following months, during which we collected additional information on ongoing programs by targeting institutions involved in US-Japan affairs, including the following: American states, cities, and towns that have sister cities in Japan, with a focus on those that have sister cities in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures; the roughly 40 Japan-America societies that are members of the National Association of Japan-America Societies; and the activities of the 50 US organizations that collected the most in contributions to assist Japan after 3/11, as well as the organizations they eventually funded.

This preliminary online research was then supplemented with telephone and in-person interviews from November 2014 to February 2015, as well as with information gathered through JCIE's networks of major civil society organizations, charitable foundations, and governmental entities active in US-Japan relations, the Tohoku reconstruction efforts, and international exchange in general.<sup>5</sup>

The TOMODACHI Initiative, a public-private partnership administered by the US-Japan Council in collaboration with the US Embassy in Tokyo, was similarly inspired by the disaster, and it has become a major supporter of US-Japan exchange programs, some of which involve hundreds of students traveling at a time. Many of their programs focus on broader US-Japan youth exchange, including students not affected by 3/11. The length of those programs varies from short-term programs that involve only a week or two in each other's country (which tend to involve larger groups of students), to more extensive programs that send select students to study for a year or longer at local schools as full-time students.



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At the other end of the spectrum, there are numerous programs that involve only a handful of participants and that are run by small NPOs, NGOs, or individuals. For example, Kodomo no Empowerment Iwate (E-Pa+ch), a Japanese NPO that runs tutoring projects in Iwate, brought six students from their special English classes to New York and Pennsylvania, giving them a chance to try out their English skills and experience American culture. Many of these small programs are organized through the efforts of individual leaders and often on an ad hoc basis when opportunities and resources become available. Since they are small in scope and usually gain attention only at the local level, they tend to fly under the radar, making them difficult to track in a systematic manner. Nevertheless, what individual students experience in smaller programs is no less valuable than what can be gained in large exchanges, and that impact should not be neglected.

One of the most common themes of exchange programs for Japanese students is learning English, but many programs also have unique themes with less focus on language learning. Sports and music are some examples of this. The Japan Society of

San Diego and Tijuana organized the San Diego/Tijuana-Ofunato Youth Baseball Exchange, a reciprocal exchange of middle school baseball players that brought students to each other's countries to take part in homestays, baseball training, and community service projects together. Another example is TOMODACHI x NIKE GO GIRL PROJECT, through which female collegiate athletes in Japan who were disaster victims trained with female collegiate athletes from the United States with the goal of participating in a marathon.

Leadership development is another area of focus that seems to be gaining some popularity, and we identified at least four programs that are specifically aimed at nurturing the next generation of leaders. One example of this is the Softbank Leadership Program, operated in partnership with TOMODACHI and implemented by Ayusa International, which brings a hundred high school students to the United States for three weeks to learn leadership skills and develop individual community service projects. Japanese students from Iwaki in Fukushima Prefecture who participated in the program developed plans to promote tourism in their hometown based on their experiences on the trip to the United States, and it was later developed into a commercial package tour to be sold by a travel agency.

As is true with other types of exchange programs, student exchanges also emerged at times out of unplanned, unexpected situations without any set goals at the start. An exchange between Takata High School in Rikuzentakata and Del Norte High School in Crescent City, California, represents such a case. A fishing boat that had been used by Takata High School was swept away by the tsunami and then, two years later, washed ashore in Crescent City. Students from Del Norte High School volunteered to clean up the boat and returned it to Takata High School, and that act developed into a friendship between the two schools. Later, Del Norte students visited Rikuzentakata, and their visit was recently reciprocated by Takata students who visited California.

There are also programs that target university students. Universities around the United States have set up various projects related to the 3/11 disaster, which include classes, special lectures, and research. Some of those have elements of grassroots exchange. For example, the Immersion Experience Program of the Harvard Business School involves a great amount of exchange between students and local residents

in Tohoku, resulting in personal ties among those involved. In this program, students visit affected communities in Tohoku to learn about the state of the reconstruction efforts, take part in volunteer activities, interact with local high school students, and perhaps as one of the highlights of the project, consult with local farmers and businesses for whom they then develop business plans and marketing strategies. The University of Maryland also has a course on Tohoku reconstruction that involves a weeklong stay and exchange in Japan. Similarly, Ohio University carried out study abroad programs annually from 2011 to 2013 that took groups of students and alumni to Otsuchi to engage in volunteer activities.

Some educational programs have targeted teachers instead of students. Programs such as the University of Pennsylvania's Phila-Nipponica Project, which prepares teachers in the Philadelphia area to promote knowledge and understanding of Japan in their classrooms, developed a program after the 3/11 disaster in which participants can learn about and explore how Japan rebuilt after the historic devastation that occurred in the past in Hiroshima and Kobe and, most recently, in Tohoku.

## Sister Cities

Japan has close to 400 sister cities (and over 20 sister states) in the United States, more than any other pair of countries in the world. These sister-city relations became a major vehicle for mobilizing grassroots support for Japan after the 3/11 disaster, as close to 100 US towns, cities, and states that have sister cities in Japan held organized campaigns that raised more than \$2.4 million for earthquake relief. Donations and goodwill wishes sent from sister cities and towns in the United States were followed up with many thank-you letters and visits by residents and students from their Japanese sister cities. This study found at least 20 cases of sister-city visits that took place between Japanese sister cities from the areas affected by the 3/11 disaster and their US counterparts. While many sister-city exchange programs existed prior to the disaster, 3/11 gave a special significance to their ties.

One example that illustrates the power of sister-city ties involves Fort Bragg, a small town in California that raised over a quarter of a million dollars for Otsuchi, its sister city, which was one of the towns hardest hit by the tsunami. Less than a month after the disaster,

Fort Bragg received a message from Otsuchi's vice mayor, writing in place of the town's mayor who had been lost in the tsunami. The message thanked the residents of Fort Bragg for their support and promised to resume their student exchange program as soon as they could. This was followed by a visit by Fort Bragg residents to Otsuchi in 2014. In January 2015, Otsuchi was finally able to officially resume the exchange program, sending their first group—four students and five residents—to Fort Bragg since the disaster. The group presented a “*kizuna* flag” to Fort Bragg as a symbol of their gratitude and of the enduring bond between the two communities.<sup>8</sup>

At the state level, a delegation from the Miyagi prefectural government visited Delaware in 2012 to thank their sister state for the donations and support that had been sent to Miyagi and to report on the progress of the recovery and reconstruction. The government delegation was then followed by a student group from Miyagi, which visited Delaware to take part in an exchange program with their Delaware counterparts.

In some cases, sister cities have developed a sense of reciprocity that strengthens their bonds. When the small Minnesota town of Winona experienced a flood in 2007, they received donations of approximately \$2,500 from Misato, its sister city in Japan. Winona residents in return raised funds after 3/11, resulting in a \$10,000 donation to Misato, which was affected by the 3/11 disaster even though it is located inland. This exchange of donations was followed by a visit of Misato students to Winona, during which they gave a speech to Winona residents to thank them for the support they had extended to Misato after the disaster.

### Major Post-3/11 Sister City Fundraising

|                    | Amount      | Sister City in Japan |
|--------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| 1 Riverside, CA    | \$589,500   | Sendai City          |
| 2 Fort Bragg, CA   | \$253,000   | Otsuchi City         |
| 3 Dallas, TX       | \$185,500   | Sendai City          |
| 4 Delaware State   | \$108,000   | Miyagi Prefecture    |
| 5 Orlando, FL      | ≈ \$100,000 | Urayasu City         |
| 6 Plymouth, MA     | ≈ \$100,000 | Shichigahama City    |
| 7 Kansas City, MO  | ≈ \$78,000  | Kurashiki City       |
| 8 Napa, CA         | \$61,000    | Iwanuma City         |
| 9 Clarinda, IA     | \$58,000    | Tamana City          |
| 10 Springfield, MO | \$54,000    | Isesaki City         |

Source: JCIE survey as of September 2012.

While many of these sister cities had exchange programs before the disaster, the focus of the visits shifted in some cases. They offered an opportunity for visitors from Japanese towns and cities, especially from communities that were affected by the disaster, to show gratitude to their American friends for their support. Sister-city exchange represents cultural exchange in the traditional sense in that it focuses on building friendship between the people of two cities through visits and exchanges of letters and gifts. The support of friends from across the ocean held special meaning for the disaster victims, and that strengthened the emotional bond between the sister cities at a personal level.



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### Exchanges on the Theme of Civil Society

One of the growing trends in US-Japan exchange programs after 3/11 has been a resurgence of interest in exchanges with themes related to civil society and the nonprofit sector. It reflects the important role played by US and Japanese NGOs and NPOs in the aftermath of the disaster, from the emergency relief stage through to the ongoing reconstruction efforts. While there has been a much larger set of activities focusing on civil society and its role in responding to the disaster—symposiums, workshops, networking events, and site visits—there are a number that can be classified as grassroots exchange programs in the sense that their aim is to provide an opportunity for a high level of face-to-face interaction among participants. The exchange programs that focus on civil society can be broken down into three categories: exchanges for people working in the Japanese and US nonprofit sectors, exchanges involving volunteerism, and exchanges that aim more broadly to promote public understanding of civil society.

The first category of exchange programs focuses on professionals currently employed in the nonprofit sector and involves efforts to build up the capacity of Japanese civil society, strengthen networks between Japanese and

US NGO staff, and promote mutual learning among American and Japanese civil society groups and social entrepreneurs. Programs that bring Japanese NGO leaders involved in the 3/11 response to the United States for study programs and training, for example, fall into this category. The ultimate goal of such programs is to help Japanese civil society groups learn new ideas and skills so that they can contribute to the reconstruction of the disaster-hit areas more effectively, but they also tend to be intentionally designed to nurture personal ties between civil society leaders in the two countries.

For example, one program sponsored by the Japan Society of New York brings together a small group of leaders from Japanese and American organizations

that are working on the issues of economic revitalization and community rebuilding in Tohoku, New Orleans, and other areas devastated by natural disasters and major socioeconomic shifts. This three-year-long program provides the participants with opportunities to visit each other's country and engage in intensive discussions on their work on multiple occasions, resulting in strong personal ties that go beyond being mere acquaintances who simply exchanged business cards.

Meanwhile, other programs have focused more narrowly on issues specific to the work of humanitarian assistance NGOs. For instance, the TOMODACHI NGO Leadership Program operated by Japan Platform and Mercy Corps has brought Japanese NGO staff to the United States for exchanges with the members of InterAction, the main consortium of international humanitarian NGOs based in the United States, as well as for study visits to explore the possibility of creating a Japanese counterpart to the US-based NVOAD (National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters).

A second significant group of exchanges are those that involve volunteerism or service learning, typically providing opportunities for groups of Americans to volunteer for a short period of time in the disaster zone. In most cases, these are structured as a component of

exchanges that have a broader focus, for example as part of student exchanges.

A third category has entailed exchange programs that focus on increasing public awareness on civil society issues more generally. These tend to target a broader pool of participants outside of the staff of NGOs and NPOs. One example of this is a program entitled “Building the TOMODACHI Generation,” which is run by the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars in partnership with the US-Japan Research Institute with support from the TOMODACHI Initiative.<sup>9</sup> During the two-week program, college students from Japan and the United States were engaged in workshops, seminars, and projects centered on the theme of the role of civil society and the importance of cross-sectoral approaches in solving social issues. The goal of such a program is to promote the general understanding and development of Japanese civil society going beyond Tohoku, and it can also be categorized as a student exchange or other type of exchange. However, it is worth noting it here as a new theme for exchange programs that target students or general participants that did not exist a decade ago. It reflects a growing interest in the work of civil society groups in Japan, especially related to recovery and reconstruction after 3/11.

### **Exchanges among Communities Affected by Disasters**

People and communities who went through traumatic events are able to share their experiences and understand each other better. There are exchange programs that specifically focus on this element. One example is the September 11th Families’ Association’s outreach mission to Tohoku. In this program, families of 9/11 victims traveled to Tohoku to reach out to the families of the victims of the 3/11 disaster, to listen and share their experiences of losing loved ones. The program was initiated out of a strong desire to help on the part of 9/11 families as they saw the suffering of the people in Tohoku. The program was launched by the Japan Medical Society of America and the 9/11 Tribute Center, and it developed into a powerful program that created strong emotional bonds between people from Tohoku and New York City.

The New Orleans–Miyagi Youth Jazz Exchange is another example. Upon learning about the severe

destruction that had occurred in Tohoku, people in New Orleans reached out to the Wonderful World Jazz Foundation in Japan, which had been sending used instruments to New Orleans and had organized a fundraising campaign after Hurricane Katrina hit. The foundation facilitated the donation of musical instruments from New Orleans to children in a jazz



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band in Kesennuma who had lost their instruments in the tsunami. In 2012, this initiative developed into an exchange that brought 16 high school jazz band members from New Orleans to the disaster zone, including Kesennuma, to play music with students in local schools and take part in cultural exchange activities with residents. The following year, 19 members of Swing Dolphins, a youth jazz band from Kesennuma, paid a reciprocal visit to New Orleans, where they were able to reunite with the American students who had visited the previous year and to play in a concert.

A similar exchange was created after Hurricane Sandy devastated parts of New York. In 2014, as part of a new Brooklyn-Japan Baseball Exchange Program, roughly 100 Japanese youths from the Tohoku disaster zone traveled to the United States to play baseball against American students who had experienced the storm. The organizers hoped that the students could use their shared experiences with tragedy to build closer ties to one another.

It is not hard to imagine that people who have gone through traumatic events are able to share their stories and develop a strong emotional bond with others who have had similar experiences. While the goal of these programs is to help the victims of 3/11, they also play an important role in helping the American participants who have gone through disasters to deal with their own challenges and difficulties that continue on long after the tragedy has passed.

## MOTIVATIONS DRIVING POST-3/11 GRASSROOTS EXCHANGES

WHY HAS THE 3/11 DISASTER TRIGGERED THIS EXTRAORDINARY INCREASE in exchange programs? Under normal circumstances, international grassroots exchanges are commonly viewed as a way for people to experience different cultures, broaden their perspectives, learn a new language, and make friends from different countries. While these still apply, the 3/11 disaster offered additional reasons for organizing and participating in international exchanges.

On the Japanese side, there is a growing sense that exchanges can help people affected by the disaster in dealing with the psychological difficulties they suffer following their traumatic experience. Especially for young people, giving them a chance to try something novel and ambitious such as a trip abroad is considered to be a means of keeping them from succumbing to depression or to a sense of confinement after being stuck in temporary housing for years and growing up in a community full of adults suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, unemployment, and other social and economic problems as a result of the disaster. As students are experiencing a challenging time in school, family, and community in the post-disaster years, it is important that they be able to dream and to see the possibilities that lie beyond the immediate environment, especially for those living in small communities that have very limited future prospects for young people at this moment.

In fact, the importance of getting outside and seeing life beyond their immediate surroundings is not limited to youth, but applies equally to adults who are living or working in Tohoku. For those who are fortunate enough to travel, international exchange gives them a chance to reflect on their work and life and gain a different perspective. Receiving international visitors can also have a similar effect for residents in Tohoku, providing an experience that is out of the ordinary, so that they could gain new perspectives and see different possibilities for the future, although the experience may not be as dramatic as traveling abroad oneself.

For Americans, 3/11 was an event that made them view their ties to Japan in a different light. As seen in the cases of sister-city exchanges, those with some prior tie to Japan felt even more connected to their Japanese partners after seeing the disaster unfold, partly thanks to technology that made timely information

sharing and communication possible. In fact, technology also helped people without such prior ties to Japan feel like they were somehow sharing an intense experience with the survivors as they followed what happened in Tohoku in the media or on the Internet. Such feelings of connectedness led to a desire to help, which contributed to their interest in exchanges with Japan that focus on Tohoku's recovery and reconstruction.

For professionals, such as NPO and NGO leaders, the motivations for taking part in exchanges likely come from more concrete goals directly associated with their work. Japanese NPO leaders are eager to take the opportunity to gain new knowledge, ideas, skills, and networks in the United States or elsewhere. American civil society leaders may get involved out of their desire simply to help, but such programs also provide them with opportunities to learn about post-disaster communities and the various recovery and reconstruction efforts, which could serve as lessons or models for American cases. It should also be added that while the initial motivations may be more focused on professional goals, taking part in exchange programs from time to time results in the development not only of institutional linkages between American and Japanese organizations, but also of personal friendships among participants who share a similar passion and experience.

People and organizations in the United States who have experienced a disaster themselves may also decide to reach out in the hope of repaying the kindness that was shown to them in their time of need. In fact, this sense of reciprocity can be a strong driving force that deepens grassroots ties. After Hurricane Sandy hit the New York metropolitan area in November 2012, Peace Boat, a Japanese NGO, sent a team of nine staff members and volunteers to undertake relief activities in communities hit by the storm. Their efforts were explicitly rooted in a desire to convey a message of appreciation to Americans for their support for Tohoku after the earthquake and tsunami hit the

region and in their wish to reciprocate for the support that Americans showed Japan. A 3/11 survivor from Ishinomaki was included among the members of the team that traveled to the United States so that he could represent the community that received help from Americans.

The story surrounding Sadako's crane also illustrates how reciprocity can be an important element in grassroots exchange. In 2007, one of five original origami cranes made by Sadako Sasaki, a 12-year-old girl who died from exposure to the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, was donated to New York's 9/11 Tribute Center, located directly across from the ruins of the World Trade Center, by the Sasaki family as a call for peace. In 2012, an outreach mission organized by the September 11th Families' Association, the Rotary Club, and the Japanese Medical Society of America symbolically

"returned" Sadako's crane by presenting Fukushima with a statue of an origami crane that was fabricated out of steel recovered from the World Trade Towers. Their hope was that the statue, now installed in a park in the town of Koriyama and facing the direction of New York, would serve to comfort and speed the recovery of the children of Tohoku. Such touching stories of reciprocity clearly help forge strong emotional ties between the communities of the two countries.

Finally, some exchange programs are driven by the interests of funders. Grassroots exchanges, especially exchanges that involve children, are an attractive way to use the funds that have flowed into the field as they are generally visible and appeal to the public. For example, there was a massive disaster response budget in the Japanese government, and the Ministry of Finance was able to access this to earmark funds to bring alumni of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program who had lived in towns in the Tohoku region back to their old communities. Similarly, a great deal of funding became available for the Kizuna Project and the TOMODACHI Initiative, which served as an incentive for some groups to expand their exchanges.

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## ASSESSING THE IMPACT ON US-JAPAN EXCHANGES

THREE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS NEED TO BE ASKED TO GET A CLEARER SENSE of the impact of 3/11 as it pertains to US-Japan grassroots exchange. First, how much has 3/11 led to changes in the field of US-Japan grassroots exchange, especially in terms of the availability of funding and the overall thematic focus of the exchanges? Second, what difference have grassroots exchange programs actually made for people and communities in Tohoku? And third, what are the implications of those exchange programs for the broader US-Japan relationship?

### **Funding**

Perhaps the most visible impact of 3/11 was the increased availability of funding for US-Japan exchange. The 3/11 disaster led to an outpouring of funds to support various Tohoku-related activities, and a portion of this went to support grassroots exchanges that involve people and communities affected by the disaster. An examination of the 151 exchanges identified for this study indicates that more than \$52 million in funding has been allocated for US-Japan grassroots exchange after the disaster, an enormous sum by historical standards.

The TOMODACHI Initiative, now a major player in US-Japan grassroots exchange, can be considered a product of the philanthropic response to the disaster, and it is both a program coordinator as well as a supporter of various exchange initiatives. Nearly \$31 million has been raised by the US-Japan Council for the TOMODACHI Initiative. One of its special funds, the TOMODACHI Fund for Exchanges, which allows Japanese youth to take part in educational exchanges in the United States, was established with donations from Japanese corporations that amounted to more than \$4 million. The Japan Society of New York also made grants to organizations such as AFS-USA and BEYOND Tomorrow and supported grassroots exchange using their Japan Earthquake Relief Fund, which was established with donations that came to the organization after 3/11. Many other old and new funders made grants or extended support to grassroots exchange programs after 3/11, making more funds available in the field and contributing to the launch of new programs.

However, this outpouring of funds has also created some challenges. One potential issue is the concentration of funds. In the field of US-Japan grassroots exchange, the flow of donations tended to be concentrated in a few major organizations that have a visible presence. Thus, the responsibility and pressure to disburse funds fell on the shoulders of large funders. They face the challenge of how to ensure accessibility to funds for the smallest of organizations and to maintain the rich diversity of programs that currently exist among various grassroots exchange programs run by organizations large and small.

Beyond the issue of funding alone, there is also an imbalance in the availability of information between programs that are supported by established institutions or governmental entities that have a greater capacity for public outreach and those by smaller organizations that maintain a low profile. A great deal of national-level attention has focused on the handful of large exchange programs run by well-known organizations, but the reality is that numerous activities have been carried out by smaller organizations that fall under the radar, making it easy to miss the real depth and diversity of programs that are taking place.

Immediately after the disaster, another challenge that arose was the potential diversion of funds to 3/11-related exchanges, away from other types of grassroots exchange programs. While this is less of an issue now after four years than right after the disaster, it was a valid concern as there is only a limited amount of funding available in the field of US-Japan exchange. At the national level in Japan and the United States, there is a finite pool of funding for grassroots exchange, and much of the support comes from private and quasi-governmental foundations such as the Japan Foundation, the Japan–United States Friendship Commission, and the United States–Japan Foundation. All of these organizations felt obligated to contribute in some way to the disaster response, but their resources were fixed. Some funders were aware of the risk that focusing on funding disaster-related exchanges might undermine the regular, long-term exchanges that form the backbone of bilateral people-to-people ties and made a conscious effort to keep the balance between general activities and 3/11-related programs.

## Thematic Focus of Exchanges

The 3/11 disaster also had a major impact on grassroots exchange in terms of the thematic focus. While it is difficult to precisely assess the extent of the increase in interest in exchange programs between the United States and Japan after the disaster, it is clear that 3/11 and the recovery efforts became one of the most important themes in US-Japan grassroots exchange in the aftermath of the disaster. In addition to the roughly 80 programs that the study team identified as being new initiatives that emerged after the disaster, 3/11 has also become a central theme for existing programs, including those between sister cities. It also became a major topic for all of the Japan-America societies around the country and for most other US-Japan exchange organizations, and has led to the development of new programs or a refocusing of existing activities in some cases.

As discussed in the section on motivations, grassroots exchanges targeting Tohoku have a purpose that goes beyond just cross-cultural experiences. For survivors of the disaster and young people living in post-disaster communities, taking part in international exchange is considered to be a way of alleviating psychological difficulties and giving inspiration and hope for the future. For professionals, exchange programs have been viewed as an opportunity to be exposed to new ideas and knowledge, and to build camaraderie with people who share a similar vision and passion. And for many Americans, they have been an opportunity to help those in need, although by helping others they may also help themselves in the process.

## Impact on Individual Participants

The second question regarding the impact is whether 3/11-related exchanges have made a difference in people's lives in Tohoku. The many stories from individuals who have participated in exchanges provide ample anecdotal evidence of the impact these activities have had. For many students from Tohoku who took part in exchange programs, their travels in the United States were literally a life-changing experience. Some ended up deciding that they would become a full-time student at a university abroad. Others who were inspired by what they experienced in the United

States vowed that they would take concrete steps to help their communities. Organizations and programs such as BEYOND Tomorrow, TOMODACHI Initiative, and the Kizuna Project have done a good job of documenting personal stories and feedback from students who participated in the programs. Students who took part in smaller-scale programs had equally fulfilling experiences, and there are many encouraging stories, such as those of students who decided to dedicate themselves more to their English studies, to run for a position in student council, or to go back to the United States on his or her own one day. There are countless such examples, and they serve to demonstrate that those programs clearly gave the participants a chance to dream big and see the future opportunities that exist.

What is lacking, however, is an effort to assess those individual accounts of program participants as collective data in order to appreciate the true magnitude of impact that various programs may have achieved. While some organizers follow up with participants and collect stories, they are usually limited to use for their own reporting or program assessment. As the number of participants in international exchange involving Tohoku now reaches into the thousands, it would be helpful to assess the collective impact of those programs beyond individual anecdotal stories. This would not only help in terms of responding to critics who question the impact of current grassroots exchange, but it would also help to assess the broader impact of grassroots exchange on the communities, as well as on Tohoku's recovery.

### Implications for the Broader US-Japan Relationship

A third question concerning the impact of grassroots exchange is about the implications for bilateral relations. It is commonly understood that mutual exposure of our citizens to one another at various levels helps to strengthen bilateral ties in the long term, so

the increased number of individuals engaged in grassroots exchange is generally considered beneficial for the bilateral relationship. While the outpouring of sympathy and goodwill after 3/11 from both sides was a reflection of grassroots ties that had existed well before the disaster, public support for US-Japan relations is likely to have been amplified by the grassroots interactions that have taken place since that time. For example, in a public opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Institute over the five years preceding 3/11, an average of slightly less than 60 percent of the Japanese public was reported as having a favorable image of the United States. This spiked to 85 percent right after the disaster, and it has stayed relatively high since, gradually declining to 66 percent in

2014. Meanwhile those who have an unfavorable opinion of the United States declined after 3/11.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in the United States, the public's view of Japan is reported to have been slightly improved after the disaster, hitting an all-time high of 83 percent in 2012.<sup>11</sup>

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There have been some indications that the upswing in visible and often heartwarming grassroots interactions has also affected perceptions of the relationship at the highest levels of leadership. In fact, top leaders in both countries have repeatedly highlighted grassroots exchanges since 3/11. For example, President Obama stated in a joint press conference in April 2012 with Prime Minister Noda, "Our joint vision commits us to deepening the ties between our peoples. This . . . includes new exchanges that will bring thousands of our young people together, including high school students, to help Japanese communities rebuild after last year's disasters."<sup>12</sup> Japanese prime ministers have similarly lauded the contributions of grassroots exchanges to bilateral ties after 3/11.

While it may be difficult to assess the true, long-term impact of the increased level of activities in US-Japan grassroots exchange on the overall bilateral relationship, the current trend can certainly be considered a positive sign, and it is hoped that the trend can be sustained in the future.

## CONCLUSION

THE 3/11 DISASTER AND ITS AFTERMATH DEMONSTRATED THE IMPORTANCE of grassroots ties from the perspective of helping communities cope with the trauma of a catastrophic event. The fact that fundraising efforts in the United States were able to mobilize at least \$737 million in private donations to support the people and communities of Tohoku was possible because of the bonds that existed between the American people and Japan. Following this immediate response, we witnessed an upswing in grassroots exchange, and these initiatives have shown the role of international grassroots ties in helping the people and communities of Tohoku on different fronts, from assisting individuals in coping with psychological difficulties after the disaster, to supporting NGOs and NPOs working on the reconstruction of disaster-hit areas.

While the potential of grassroots exchange is evident, one major concern is whether the current level of grassroots exchange, which has been boosted by this funding bubble, is sustainable over the long run. Among the programs reviewed in this study, there was only one that publicly stated its intention to run exchange projects “indefinitely.” However, that particular program is run by a for-profit company, where participants pay to take part in the program, and thus it is not a traditional grassroots exchange program. Among the programs that fit the profile of a more traditional exchange, the longest program duration to which organizers have publicly committed is five years, which is the stated length of the JET Memorial Invitation Program and the MIT Japan 3/11 Initiative. While others may be planning to continue their programs longer, private donations to Tohoku-related projects, including exchanges, have been waning with each passing year, and few observers believe that the current level of funds will be available 5 or 10 years from now. Thus, how to sustain the programs that are currently in operation is a key question for all stakeholders, and there is uncertainty about the future of the grassroots exchanges that have blossomed after 3/11.

The issue of sustainability goes beyond the availability of funds. Many programs began with the goodwill of the people involved, but

currently there is no resource that helps groups learn how to manage programs in order to build long-lasting, sustainable relationships beyond one-time exchanges. For example, as noted above, the exchange between Takata High School in Rikuzentakata and Del Norte High School in California began when the Del Norte students cleaned up and returned a fishing boat to Takata High School. Since then, students from both high schools have visited each other with support from funders such as the United States–Japan Foundation and the TOMODACHI Initiative. However, students and teachers are unsure of how to maintain the momentum for this new friendship and make it into a sustainable institutional relationship between the two schools. Thus, it is important to explore ways to support newly formed relationships in order to develop them into sustainable connections that stakeholders will be able to manage long into the future.

In addition, exploring new approaches may also help enhance these exchanges' sustainability. For example, exchanges do not have to rely solely on the traditional method of visiting each other's country. While in-person visits are still the best way to build networks among individuals and can be the highlight of a program, utilizing new technologies, for example, to widen participation and enhance follow-up processes

may be effective in terms of making the program both more inclusive and more cost-effective.

Another issue related to sustainability is the institutional infrastructure of grassroots exchange. As it takes considerable resources to develop and implement such programs, support for organizations that run exchange programs is crucial to the sustainability of those programs. In other words, if the organizations that run exchange programs are not institutionalized, programs that are currently in operation cannot survive. The Japan-America societies, for example, played an important role in mobilizing donations in the United States after 3/11, and they are currently key players in the field of grassroots exchange. However, if support for those societies dwindles again in the future, then the institutional infrastructure in the field will be weakened.

Now that four years have passed since the disaster, it is important to carefully assess the current landscape of the field of US-Japan exchange, recognize what our investments in the aftermath of 3/11 have helped to create, and think of how to best leverage this institutional base in the future. One silver lining to the tragedy of 3/11 is that US-Japan grassroots exchange is now thriving. The question is how we can maintain and build upon that trend to ensure that these exchanges contribute to a positive and robust US-Japan relationship in the future.

## NOTES

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2. East-West Center, "US-Japan Sister Cities by Prefecture," <http://www.asiamattersforamerica.org/japan/data/sister-cities-prefecture>.
3. Out of the 151 grassroots exchanges identified as having a connection to 3/11, 44 appear to have taken the form of one-time events while 107 were conducted as more intensive programs or recurring exchanges. These more intensive programs included 83 new exchanges, launched after the disaster, and 24 that predated 3/11 but were later organized around the theme of 3/11.
4. The preliminary online search identified possible exchange programs by utilizing combinations of Japanese and English search terms such as: "Higashi Nihon Daishinsai" "Beikoku," "kokusai koryu," "Tohoku," "jinzai koryu," "shinsai," "Amerika," "zaidan," "nintei NPO," "Great East Japan Earthquake," "exchange programs," "Japan," "earthquake relief," "US," and "America."
5. One of the challenges during the research was the question of how to define "exchange program." This derives from the fact that a wide range of programs exist in the United States and in Japan that focus on the 3/11 disaster and Tohoku's recovery efforts. In general, we tried to focus on the quality of activities and attempted to identify programs that aim to promote personal linkages between the people of the two countries. In concrete terms, we searched for programs that involve a visit to or stay in one another's country and face-to-face meetings for the purpose of building personal ties among participants. We also looked at the duration and frequency of activities to identify programs that aim to establish a sustainable relationship between the people of the two countries, while excluding one-time meetings or site visits with minimal personal interaction.
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