

Nurturing life after Japan's tsunami



Shukuko Koyama,
Crisis Specialist
ILO Regional Office for
Asia and the Pacific

11 March 2011. The TV screen was showing live images of the tsunami as it struck Japan's eastern coast. From what the reporter was saying, I quickly realized that the images were of my mother's hometown, where I had spent my summer vacations as a child. I could not recognize a single thing, it was all gone. It felt like the end the world.

Aiding recovery

Life has unexpected turns and one month later I was assigned to the ILO office in Bangkok to work on natural disaster issues in the Asia and Pacific region. In May 2011, I paid my first visit to the tsunami affected areas which I knew so well, as part of a mission of international experts.

The coastal towns and villages we wanted to visit were still submerged. We saw a huge fishing boat stuck on a concrete block – the remnants of a bridge that once stood a few hundred meters away. All around, there was nothing but debris. I remember thinking to myself: “How will these people rebuild their lives? It is impossible. There is nothing left.”

“I remember thinking how will these people rebuild their lives?”

There is nothing left.”

The coastal towns and villages we wanted to visit were still submerged. We saw a huge fishing boat stuck on a concrete block – the remnants of a bridge that once stood a few hundred meters away. All around, there was nothing but debris. I remember thinking to myself: “How will these people rebuild their lives? It is impossible. There is nothing left.”

I was wrong. The tsunami washed away houses, factories and boats, but it did not wash away the courage, passion and resilience of people in the area.

Post-disaster reconstruction efforts

Two years later, I went back and visited Kamaishi City, one of the most severely affected towns, this time as part of an ILO project to look at the post-disaster reconstruction efforts in Japan. During the visit, I met Takeichi Kimigahora, a young entrepreneur who runs an aquaculture farm that produces sea scallops, abalones and seaweed.

When we visited his farm, I was expecting to hear the story of a disaster victim, but what we heard was the story of a successful entrepreneur and a change maker.

Kimigahora offered us a taste of his sea scallops. We ate them raw, the Japanese way. I could tell right away they were of the best quality and I remember thinking they would sell very well in markets and restaurants across the country. As if he had read my mind, he said: “We buy scallops from our fishermen at the highest price in the country, breed them in our farm and sell them to our customers at the highest price in the country.”

I also realized profits were not the only motivation; there was more behind this success story. Long before the disaster struck, this region of Japan had undergone a severe economic and social crisis. When the steel industry went down in the 1980’s, many young people left in search of work in other regions, and Kamaishi City turned to fishing.

But after the tsunami hit, many fishermen were reluctant to go back to sea. Three out of the eighteen fishermen working for Kimigahora died in the tsunami. Another ten quit fishing because they thought they were too old. Thanks to the government’s subsidies, some food processing factories were rebuilt, but former workers – mainly women – chose not to return to their jobs because the salary was not much higher than the minimum wage.

Kimigahora knew that it was not enough to rebuild the fishery. Something also needed to be done to improve the wages and working conditions of fishermen in the area. “Food nurtures our life. Fishermen nurture our lives. So, why should they be making so little money?” he said. “Fishing and fostering scallops like the ones you just ate is an art form, and fishermen who master this art deserve more.”

A few days after our visit, I saw him again, this time in Tokyo. He was meeting business partners and attending conferences about the future of Kamaishi City and the rest of Tokohu region. He is now somewhat of a star among young social entrepreneurs who are all full of ideas for social change in his region and beyond.

They know his products are served at fancy restaurants in Tokyo and other big cities, but most of all they see him as an inspiration because he was able to get back on his feet through effort and hard work. I suspect we all see ourselves in him, especially after the 2011 disaster. As he puts it: “I feel my life is a present. I am alive and I want to work for the next generation. I am proud of what I do.”

“We all want our jobs...to give us social and financial recognition.

Decent work, in a nutshell. ”

We all want our jobs to be like that, to give us social and financial recognition and to make us feel useful to the community. Decent work, in a nutshell.