

Reconstruction Disaster: The human implications of Japan's forced return policy in Fukushima 復興災害：福島の強制帰還政策が意味すること

Suzuki Yūichi interviewed and with an introduction by Katsuya Hirano with Yoshihiro Amaya and Yoh Kawano

Transcription and translation by Akiko Anson

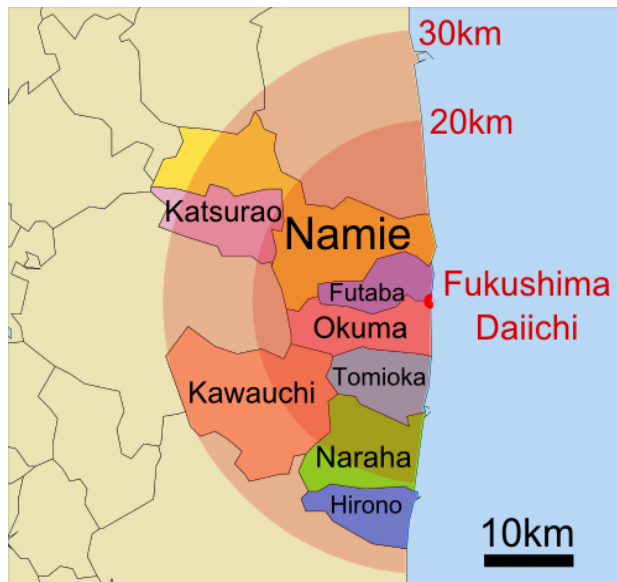


Suzuki Yūichi, Photo by Kawano Yoh

Suzuki Yūichi (56) was born to a farming family in Namie, Fukushima in 1960. Namie was one of the areas most devastated by the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, as well as the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. Besides 565 deaths from the earthquake/tsunami, because the town was located within the 20 kilometer exclusion zone around the damaged nuclear power plant, the entire town was evacuated on March 12. The government of Namie continued to operate in Nihonmatsu-city 39 kilometers from Namie. At the time of the nuclear accident, Mr. Suzuki

was working in the Citizens' Affairs Division of Namie and was immediately assigned to the Disaster Management Division established to assist citizens in finding missing family members, locating temporary housing, and evacuating families. Suzuki was subsequently responsible for decontamination efforts, return policies, and establishing clinics for prospective returnees. In the summer and the winter of 2016, I visited Namie with my colleagues Professor Yoshihiro Amaya of Niigata University and Yoh Kawano, a PhD candidate at UCLA, to interview Mr. Suzuki. Mr. Suzuki contends that the majority of former residents of Namie are unlikely to return to the town even after the Japanese government lifts the restriction on residency in certain areas on March 31, 2017. Many families have already settled in new villages, towns and cities in and outside Fukushima and continue to fear internal radioactive exposure and other dangers associated with decommissioning the damaged reactors. As a city official who led decontamination efforts and return policy, Suzuki remains skeptical of Japanese government programs for "reconstruction" or "revival" of the affected areas. He anticipates that the area will become a "no man's land" after the elderly returnees pass away. Namie's population was 21,400 at the time of the nuclear accident. He estimates that 10 percent or less will return. The interview is an important testament to the ongoing rift and

dissonance between Tokyo and Fukushima over the policies and slogans of “reconstruction” and “return”. K.H.



Hirano: Mr. Suzuki, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. You have been promoting decontamination work as a town official until recently since the 2011 disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

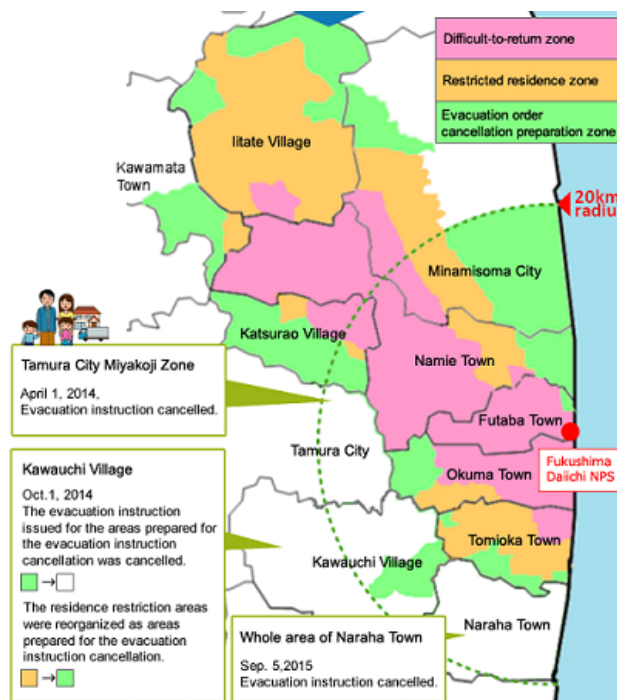
It is said that even after decontamination is completed, the radiation level will rise again. Do you think that "residents' return (*kikan*, 帰還)" and "reconstruction (*fukkō*, 復興)" are possible under such conditions? For example, through experimental planting of rice and vegetables, the possibility of reviving agriculture has been explored in Namie. How many people do you think plan to return here to resume agriculture?

Suzuki: I used to work in the decontamination control division, and as far as I know from what I learned there, once decontamination work is completed, radiation levels should not return to the high levels prior to decontamination effort. However, I have heard various doctors voicing concerns about whether the dose rates, even after decontamination, have actually dropped to safe levels, so I personally feel uncertain about this although I am not a specialist in the field.¹

I believe, however, that as long as radiation levels stay below 0.2 - 0.3 microsieverts per hour in Namie, there may not be much difference between the evacuation areas and Namie. In fact, in Nihonmatsu, where my family and I are now living, the radiation level is 0.2 or 0.1 and many people are living there.

Hirano: Some people claim that decontamination is not very effective.

Some evacuees from Namie currently living in my hometown in Ibaraki prefecture made a one-day trip to Namie last October, and were joined by a group of professors from Ibaraki University, who have been collecting and monitoring data on radiation doses in that area. They sampled soil in the area around one of the evacuees' houses, which had been declared



The Japanese government has announced that it is lifting evacuation orders in the green and orange zones on March 31, 2017. This image is taken from the website of Fukushima Prefecture.

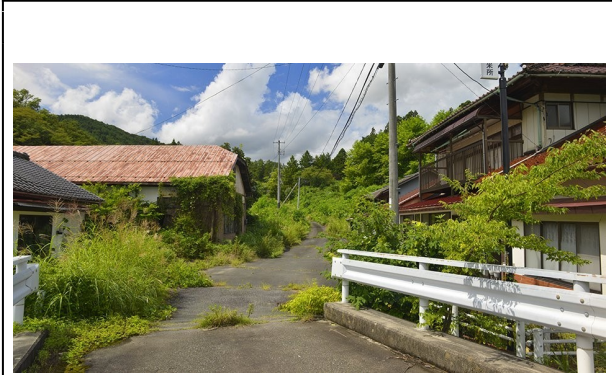
decontaminated. In some areas the level had dropped to the national and international standard (1 millisieverts per year or 0.23 microsieverts per hour), but in the backyard and in a forest area just behind the house, the radiation level was actually extremely high.²

Suzuki: It seems that it has not yet been completely decontaminated. Well, I have to say, we can't decontaminate forest areas. That would require cutting down all the trees and then scraping up all the topsoil. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to see any effect. But as far as areas around houses are concerned, all the soil has been stripped away, so the radiation level has dropped significantly. For example, my parents' house is in a so-called "zone in preparation for lifting the evacuation order." At first the radiation level was 3.0 microsieverts per hour, but after decontamination, it has dropped to less than 0.5.

Hirano: I see. But the entire contaminated region in Fukushima is richly forested- it's all surrounded by forest, not just Namie. If it is impossible to decontaminate forest areas, it means that radioactive material could easily blow in from the forest, causing radiation levels to increase in decontaminated areas. Some residents say that the radiation level has in fact risen since the decontamination. So does it mean that decontamination is effective only in urban areas where there are few forests? In other words, there is a gap between places where decontamination has been working well and places where it has not.

Suzuki: It is okay in areas where the soil has been properly stripped away, but nobody has done anything in mountain areas behind homes (*urayama*, 裏山). We town officials have been asking the Ministry of the Environment to decontaminate such areas properly as well, since they are not just nameless wooded hills. Rather, they are *Satoyama* (里山), wooded areas surrounding people's homes that are a part of their everyday lives. We've said that if

we don't decontaminate those areas we wouldn't be able to bring people back home.



Houses in wooded areas (*satoyama*) are not decontaminated. Radiation levels remain high and residents are not allowed to return.

However, if we cut all of the trees down in order to decontaminate, we will lose water retention capacity, which could result in a natural disaster. So that's another reason we can't clean up mountains and forests. We have considered just asking people to stay away from forest areas. If you take a radiation dosimeter and find 0.2 in your garden and then that same dosimeter indicates 1.0 in another place higher up, you will have to acknowledge that you have a hotspot and stay away from it. People will have to make those judgments as they go about their lives.

Hirano: It sounds psychologically stressful, doesn't it? We have to live our lives constantly telling ourselves it is okay here, but not there.

Suzuki: I know what you mean, but that is all we can do to deal with the *Satoyama* areas. And then there are rivers. Before the nuclear accident, we used to go to a river to pick up pebbles or take our kids there to play in the

water, but the Ministry of the Environment doesn't deal with rivers so they decided not to decontaminate rivers. They have not done anything to remove radiation from them. I'm talking rivers that have a levee on either side. Their reasoning probably is that once a river is flooded, it will be contaminated again. That is my guess. But rivers are also a part of everyday life, so we have been asking that they be properly decontaminated as well, but...

Hirano: Do they have a plan in place?

Suzuki: Probably not. I don't think so.

Hirano: Well, so is your town planning to prepare for residents who return, such as setting up public signs for high radiation areas to warn people not to come close to those areas? Or is it something like 'let's leave it up to people's "common sense" once they return home'?

Suzuki: I think it will likely be left up to their common sense. That's why I believe it is necessary that schools give children radiation awareness training, so that they can learn how to avoid internal radiation exposure by measuring doses of what they eat, or they can learn to stay away from dangerous places where they live. Now, this is not limited to only Fukushima, but should apply to people throughout Japan.

Hirano: In other words, from now on this kind of so-called self-responsibility will become an essential part of life in Fukushima, won't it? Later I would like to return to this topic and ask about education on the risks of nuclear power plants, and external and internal radiation exposure.

But I would like to ask you a little more about the "return policy". When I interviewed you last summer, you mentioned that under the return policy probably less than 10% of residents would come back. Has your estimate changed?

Suzuki: No. It is about the same. Regarding the estimate, we briefly had a program called "special case overnight stay" (*tokurei shukuhaku*, 特例宿泊) to allow former residents to stay in Namie during the month of September for 26 days. The only participants after all were elderly couples and some single guys, who really wished to return. That was about it.



Namie town center. Decontamination work has been completed and the streets have been cleaned up. However, it is expected that most shops will not reopen. I saw about a dozen people preparing to move back during my visit to Namie in the winter of 2016.

Also we have begun a program called "preparatory overnight stay" (*junbi shukuhaku*, 準備宿泊) since November, which allows residents who notify us to stay in evacuation areas until the evacuation orders are permanently lifted. It is still going on, but the only participants in the program have been elderly couples. We have set up a temporary emergency clinic, but only the elderly couples, who participated in both programs, the special case overnight stay and the preparatory

overnight stay, visit the clinic when they're feeling sick.

We are building a medical facility now that will be opened once the evacuation order is lifted in Namie, but it will provide nothing beyond primary and secondary medical care, so we won't have an actual inpatient facility. It means that anyone who needs to be admitted to a hospital, will have to go to a neighboring town, but these hospitals are already struggling with a shortage of doctors and nurses, so I am doubtful that they will be able to accept outside patients any time soon.

In my opinion, if you remain wherever you've evacuated to, you can always be admitted to a hospital and receive necessary medical care. I always tell people to think about these things before they decide to return home. The clinic doctor also explains this to his patients, but elderly couples really want to come back to Namie. The doctor believes they should individually decide. I ask them, "so after you return to Namie, what are you going to do if you feel sick and need to be hospitalized? You won't have a place to go." They say, "I will go to a hospital in so-and-so town." Then I ask, "what if they can't admit you there? Even after you are discharged from a hospital, where are you going?" "I am going to a nursing home."

But in reality, even the nursing homes are understaffed and unable to accept new patients. There are facilities, but there isn't enough staff to run a facility and give adequate care.

When I ask what they are going to do, they have no concrete answers. They just have a vague idea about going there and maybe being admitted to a hospital. They just want to come back home. That is their strongest feeling. It seems that they just don't want to stay where they have been since evacuation. That was the case of an elderly couple I dealt with recently.

Hirano: Had they been living in temporary

housing for quite a while then?³

Suzuki: Yes. Also lack of employment opportunities for a generation of breadwinners is another reason why I think that less than 10% of evacuees will come back. In addition, many have children attending school in the places they evacuated to, so it is not possible to think about returning.

I had my children with me when the evacuation order came, and I ended up sending them to school in the town where we settled. As you know, I did it not because they wanted to change schools but because they had to. It is possible for my children to graduate from the schools they are currently attending. No matter how much you say that it's safe, that it's okay to go back, parents need to think about the considerable burden placed on children by switching schools, as this poses another risk to children.

Also it's been almost six years since we were forced to leave our town. The reality is that children no longer have friends from Namie. This is the same with my children. All of their friends are the ones they met after we evacuated to Nihonmatsu, and once they go to high school, they only hang out with friends from their high school. At the time of the evacuation, one of my children was a 4th grader in elementary school, but she does not see any of her classmates from that time. She has no connection with other children from Namie. Even if you move back here, you will need to find a job, but there will be no employment other than reconstruction-related work.

Hirano: While we're on that subject, would you say something about lifting the evacuation orders? I understand this applies only to limited areas of the town and not to the entire town.

Suzuki: Yes, the town is divided into three areas, the "zone in preparation for lifting the evacuation order," "restricted residence area,"

and "difficult-to-return zone." This is divided according to radiation levels, and according to the government report submitted to the town, there are plans to lift evacuation orders in the first two zones sometime in March 2017. As for the third zone, the difficult-to-return zone, no plan has been announced.

Hirano: Does it mean that residents who have a house or property in the town except for the difficult-to-return zone, are allowed to return if they wish?

Suzuki: Yes, that is right.

Hirano: But as you mentioned earlier, even in the areas designated safe to return, various facilities, which returnees will need to restart their lives, are not in place yet, so they are likely to face multiple hardships. But if they choose to return no matter what, the municipal government will support them. Is this the current situation?

Suzuki: Yes. We have been working to restore infrastructure to its pre- earthquake and tsunami state. Concerning the water supply goes, restoration work is nearly complete, and the sewer system has been restored in areas where the evacuation orders are expected to be lifted to the point that we can operate, although I can't say it is 100% yet.

Concerning infrastructure, a few businesses such as commercial and medical facilities, the post office, and a banking facility have resumed operation. One financial institution opened a branch office in Namie sometime last year, however it's not as though everyone uses that one bank, so I don't know what to say about that.

Hirano: A moment ago Mr. Kawano and I stopped by the temporary shopping arcade, which is set up next to the town hall. It houses 11 stores now, and we spoke with some of the owners. They are truly concerned about the prospects for their businesses. They believe

that only a few will come back to town and that they won't be able to sustain their businesses.

Right now they keep their stores open experimentally with financial support from the local government, but they know that the support won't last forever. They seem to be struggling with the long-term prospects for their businesses. I wonder what the point of this trial exercise is without a prospect for the future.

Suzuki: Well, more than a trial exercise, it is rather to show people that there are at least places to buy food, hardware, daily commodities, dry cleaning. It is to show that we have a place to at least get basic necessities, though these stores are very small.

The prosperity of these stores will probably depend on how many people eventually move back. I don't think evacuees will bother coming here all the way from where they are currently staying to go shopping. But when you drop in at Namie, as long as there is a convenience store, you can get almost everything, except for hardware. They have drinks, food, first-aid kits, laundry detergent and even cigarettes and some little luxury items. There are also some small restaurants, and I heard that they are the top-selling businesses. And the Lawson convenience store in the temporary shopping arcade carries a bit of fresh food.

I have a feeling that even the participants of the preparation stay program brought a lot of food with them when they came back. So among the 11 stores in the temporary arcade, I heard that only the restaurants have been successful. Instead of buying food and cooking, people will get a box lunch from a convenience store or order meals for home delivery. It seems that this is the current situation.

Kawano: The store owners at the shopping arcade I spoke to also said that considering the lack of enthusiasm for the movement to return in town, it is hard to believe that the evacuation

orders will be lifted sometime in March here in Namie.

Suzuki: Yeah. We have some estimates that 500 or 1,000 residents might move back, but even if they do come back, they are likely to feel that they are the only ones or the only families living in Namie since they can't expect to have many neighbors around them. Especially at night, you usually see lights on in every house by 7pm or 8pm, but you won't be able to see that. So if you have next-door neighbors on both sides when you return, you might feel as if you've finally returned to your hometown, but the reality is that with people evacuated to locations all over the country, it is not easy to coordinate your return with other families.

The best way might be to move into public housing built for evacuees or disaster recovery public housing. All of the units might not be filled, but you would have some other families living in the same complex, so it might feel more reassuring.

But I don't think it will be that easy. In fact, it has been a year since neighboring towns, such as Hirano-machi, Naraha-machi, and Odaka-ku of Minami Sōma, lifted their evacuation orders, but most evacuees who have returned are elderly people.⁴ Some of them have been encouraging others to return, something like "oh, so and so is back, so we should return, too." Watching how those other towns are going, I feel it might be possible for some evacuees from Namie to decide to return home encouraged by their pioneering neighbors.

It is also true, however, that while such efforts are being made, some elderly evacuees will probably pass away in 10 or 15 years. Elementary or junior high school students at the time of evacuation will be almost in their 30s, won't they? Namie will be just a place for a little bit of memory and nostalgia, "oh, I remember there used to be a house I used to live in when I was little," but no more, no less. That's why it will be extremely difficult to bring

people back to town after all these years. I am not surprised at all if places like Namie-machi or Odaka-ku will become a "no man's land" 20 or 30 years later.

Hirano: In Odaka-ku, where decontamination work has been completed, some farmers have begun experimentally planting a few crops and exploring the possibility of reviving agriculture. How many farmers are really thinking about returning to restart agriculture? How likely are they to be able to sell their rice or other crops once they prove to be free of radioactive substances? Also does the government have any plans to support these farmers?

Suzuki: In order to eliminate harmful rumors (*fūhyō higai*, 風評被害) against produce from Fukushima, the governor has been disseminating information about safety of food from Fukushima to the whole country. Our mayor has also been promoting safety of our produce by taking rice grown here to the Ministry of the Environment for testing.⁵

But the farmers participating in this test planting are all elderly people. After all, there are few young farmers in Namie, and the majority of people engaged in agriculture here are older people. Before the accident, their adult children used to help in the field as part-time farmers, but they had to abandon their fields due to the evacuation, and as a result they have ended up losing their connection with agriculture.

I believe those who want to come back and resume agriculture now will be mostly retired people, the elderly, so I am not sure how long they will be able to continue with agriculture considering they won't have help from the younger generations. Even the younger people I am talking about here, who might consider returning to engage in agriculture, will probably be in their 50s, so I would say most farmers will be 75 or older.

Hirano: So it sounds like even if the

experimental planting succeeds, these farmers are not actually pursuing an operation to make a living. Like the elderly couples you mentioned earlier, these farmers really want to return home and as long as they can grow enough to feed themselves, they will be happy.

Suzuki: That's what I think. They feel terrible about leaving the land they inherited from their ancestors unattended for such a long time. The decontamination work has been completed, and all the weeds in their fields have been pulled. Now that their land is back to normal again, they probably want to at least cultivate it and harvest crops they can eat in the land their ancestors passed on to them.



Nemoto Sachiko and Kōichi run organic farms in Odaka of Minami Sōma. They moved back to their home as soon as the government took Odaka off the designated hazard zone in April 2012. The Nemoto family has been farming land here since the early 17th century. Kōichi has been working with researchers at Niigata University to grow rice and vegetables since 2012 and his crops have been confirmed free of radiation. Their neighbors and friends

have not returned, and they think that they will not return. Photos by Yoh Kawano.

Of course, I cannot say for sure that they have no intention of earning income by selling their produce. I am sure it will make them happy if they can do so, but I don't think that it will be a high priority in their mind right now.

Speaking of rice produced through test planting, as long as it is certified to be safe, it is can be sold in the market. It is true that the rice is tested on a bag-by-bag basis to ensure the radioactive cesium level does not exceed the limit, and the contaminated soil has been treated with zeolite. The deep plowing method has also been applied to the soil so that the upper layer soil can be replaced with a lower layer.

In my opinion, however, some radioactive substances still remain in the soil. It means it is possible that there are still some risks of farmers being exposed to radiation in their fields. Right now there is no technique that has been established to remove zeolite from the soil. The best way would be to scrape off the soil completely, but this would also remove the compost, which would probably affect soil fertility and crop growth. In fact, rice yields have decreased considerably compared to before the accident. So I guess we need to figure out how to deal with these problems associated agricultural land in the future.

Amaya: I believe it is very important to establish control measures to minimize radiation exposure to farmers.

Suzuki: I also think the government needs to properly communicate the risks, educating farmers about the risks caused by radiation instead of giving them a go-ahead based only on whether or not radioactive substances are

detected in their produce. For example, before the accident it was not uncommon for them to roll up their trousers and enter a rice paddy barefooted if they needed to fix some small thing. But now they need to be advised to avoid doing so because radioactive substances may still remain in the soil. Although the level of airborne radioactivity has been reduced, it does not mean the substances have been completely removed. The radioactive compounds have been buried deeper in the soil by deep plowing and also remain with zeolites in the soil.

Amaya: What zeolite does is absorb radioactive cesium in the soil, so it makes crops less likely to absorb cesium, but as long as zeolites stay in the soil, radioactive substances will remain in the soil as well.

Hirano: Is there any way to remove zeolites from the soil?

Amaya: As far as I know, there is no way to remove zeolites that have absorbed radioactive cesium from the soil selectively or efficiently at low cost.

Hirano: The only option is to leave them in the soil.

Amaya: Some researchers have been trying to develop technology to remove radioactive cesium from zeolites. In fact, it is possible in principle to dissociate cesium absorbed into zeolites with acid, but you would need a lot of equipment to treat a large amount of soil, and a facility to store radioactive cesium. The cost for all of this might pose a big problem. Also during the process of dissociation, mineral nutrients in the soil are likely to be removed, so it might also become a problem when it comes to growing crops.

Hirano: That means that we have to remove all the soil, doesn't it? It sounds like it may be extremely difficult to revitalize agriculture, which had been the mainstay of Fukushima.

Suzuki: Well, it won't be easy for sure. First of all, we need to figure out how to solve the problem of manpower. I think we can recruit people, but as I have mentioned before, those who are interested in engaging in agriculture and actually have the agricultural skills to do it are mostly elderly people in their late 60s and 70s. It will be hard for them to remain active for the next 10 or 20 years. So the future of agriculture is an open question. I don't think it will be easy to revive it.

Hirano: Namie has wonderful mountains and ocean, and before the nuclear accident, it was known as a place where you could harvest not only rice but any food you want. It used to be surrounded by rich, beautiful nature.

According to surveys of city dwellers before the accident, Fukushima was always one of the most ideal places to move to enjoy the country life in retirement. In your view, what had most attracted people to Namie before the disaster?

Suzuki: Well, to put it briefly, a lot of it is the rustic atmosphere. Namie is not really urban, but it's not just a narrow-minded backwoods town, either. We have traditional crafts like Obori Soma ceramic ware, and both fishery and forestry were active. There were farmers who grew pears and other fruit. Rice, fish, fruits, seasonal foods like mushrooms and vegetables--all these were within our reach. Namie was a comfortable and easy place to live.



Obori Sōma Ceramic Ware

Hirano: All such things have been destroyed, haven't they? That's where things stand now in Namie.

Suzuki: That's right. There is no doubt that the nuclear industry was one main factor that made this town prosperous. All the regions throughout Japan where nuclear power stations were located, were very poor. There was nothing to develop. This was true for Namie where Fukushima Daiichi (Fukushima No.1 Nuclear Power Station) and Daini (Fukushima No.2 Nuclear Power Station) are located.

But remember, we were always lectured with the myth of nuclear safety, and I was taught it since I was little. We visited the nuclear energy information center on a social studies school trip and learned about how it would work and how beneficial it would be, like how it could create energy at a low cost. I do not recall any discussion about radiation at all. That's why we never thought it could cause such a danger.

That's how we grew up here. It is also true that we had a low unemployment rate in this town because there were a quite a few people engaged in nuclear power-related work. Our tax revenue also had been going up, and the nuclear industry had promoted our local economies significantly. So economically the

town and the industry maintained a mutually beneficial relationship.



Namie High School before the Nuclear Disaster

Hirano: So residents here had a very positive impression of the economic effect brought by the nuclear industry?

Suzuki: I think they did. At least I did.

Hirano: So while the safety myth had been accepted widely by residents, neither the central government nor TEPCO had explained anything about nuclear related risks.

Suzuki: No, they didn't talk about risk. We were told that accidents could not happen.

Hirano: That means they didn't explain that if an accident were to happen, how serious a disaster it could cause, or even how much of the community could be destroyed. Nothing like that at all...

Suzuki: I don't think so. There is a PR facility nearby the power stations, and there might have been some kind of explanation concerning nuclear risks there, but I don't remember it, even if they had anything. So I think probably

not at all. This must be true for other communities with nuclear power plants nationwide.

Hirano: I agree with you. My hometown is close to Tokai-mura, and I heard the same thing from residents there, as well. This is probably how the safety myth spread through all these communities. The residents were told how it would bring positive economic effects and significant wealth to their community. That it's nothing but a win-win situation. This was how they came to accept the nuclear power plants in their community. Was it the same in Namie?

Suzuki: Yes, I think it was the same here. At least that's how I feel. I am 56 years old, and I was 50 at the time of the accident. I believed what they had told us.

I did not even realize that a cooling system failure could cause the kind of situation that it did. So at the time of evacuation, I imagined that the accident at the power plant would lead to an explosion, that is, an explosion like an atomic bomb. That was the image I had then about the accident.

However, at the time of the accident, plant workers I talked to said that the loss of power supply and the failure of cooling system in one unit would cause problems with all four units. They all said that. Obviously those who were engaged in the plant work knew so much more about radiation, such as the limit of radiation exposure, since they worked in a strict radiation-control environment. I am sure they had been educated well through numerous lectures about radiation.

I have a feeling that only a handful of officials in local government had knowledge about radiation at that time. I gradually learned all about how much exposure we received, and about radioactive substances Cesium 134, 137, Strontium, etc. I came to learn these things after the nuclear disaster. I had no knowledge whatsoever before then.

Hirano: Let me ask you some specific questions. What was the percentage of Namie residents who worked at TEPCO or its affiliated companies before the accident? You mentioned that the industry stimulated the local economy.

Suzuki: I would say at least 50% if we include all its subcontractors' businesses, and factories, and all the companies below them. In fact, my uncle also ran a small subcontracting company, which was about two or three steps down from the general contractors. My uncle's company dispatched workers, and he himself worked with them to make a living. So if we include all the businesses related to the TEPCO operation, such as catering, entertaining, and gift-giving, I would say at least 50% of residents here had worked for TEPCO and related industries.

Hirano: I would guess that many companies located in Namie relied heavily on TEPCO.

Suzuki: I think many of them did. I can't give you an exact proportion, but many businesses were affiliated with TEPCO.

Hirano: I would like to ask about the return policy. Are there any discrepancies between plans at the national, prefectural, and local level regarding the policies for "residents' return" and "reconstruction"?

Suzuki: My feeling is that right after the disaster, the central government was willing to listen to us and to try to help with whatever we needed, but recently I feel that they have turned everything toward lifting the evacuation orders.

Their attitude is "we've heard you enough, and we've dealt with you enough during the concentrated reconstruction period. (2011~2015) What else do you want? More money?" You might remember a cabinet member (Ishihara Nobuteru) saying, "the bottom line is they want money."⁶

The government should just contribute money – this was the feeling I got. I understand that it isn't that easy for them to dispatch officials to a local government at the spur of a moment just because we had an emergency and needed more people and help. I know the central government hires many officials as needed, so it is hard to deal with our request for more people to handle the extra work related to the evacuation.

However, it is easier to provide funds to the disaster-stricken areas. That's why they had such strong preferences for coming up with a budget rather than sending staff.

Also I feel that people who haven't been the victim of a disaster, including politicians and bureaucrats, won't be able to understand the predicament of the evacuees who were forced to flee. Here we thought that victims of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995 must have resumed normal lives after a few years of living in temporary housing.⁷ To me that was just something that happened far away in the Kansai area. Unless you experience it yourself, it's difficult to understand what it's really like.

Hirano: What the media has been saying is that for Namie, in particular, after lifting its evacuation orders, full-scale reconstruction can begin. I feel that what the Japanese government is trying to do is to send the message that the nuclear crisis in Fukushima has been finally settled. The government believes that it is necessary to do so in order to create an image of Japan rising like a phoenix from the ashes at the Tokyo Olympics of 2020. That's what it hopes to achieve by putting aside the thorny predicament of more than 100,000 evacuees and the difficulty of rebuilding communities.

I don't feel that the Japanese government is looking at reality from the standpoint of the locals. That's why they simply can't accept how much the pre-accident life in Namie has fundamentally been destroyed, as you

described earlier, and that, even for residents wishing to return, the current situation here is far from ready for them to come back and that there is no way to fix the situation. Mr. Suzuki, how do you feel about this sense that the government has conveyed that the situation in Fukushima is now under control, that reconstruction has been going well, and the return policy has been successful?

Suzuki: Well, I don't think it will be possible for the reconstruction to be completely finished even 100 years from now. We can say the reconstruction is 100% complete only when everything has been restored to the way it used to be before the evacuation. But of course, there is no way to really restore the life we had before.

So I don't think 100% reconstruction will be possible, but I think it would be nice if each family passes on its own stories of what Namie used to be like from generation to generation, from mothers and fathers to sons and daughters, and to their children, including lessons of what we learned from this nuclear accident. In fact, some NPOs and other organizations have been working hard to facilitate events so that stories about Namie may continue into the next generation.

Also, since the budget from the central government won't last forever, I think they want to lift the evacuation order to continue the next step of settling the other remaining issues in the next few years. Considering the fact that money comes from limited financial resources and the burden falling on taxpayers, I understand the situation even from the standpoint of a beneficiary.⁸

The most important thing we need to do, I think, is to figure out how to support evacuees who are struggling to put their lives back together. More than people like me who have been able to keep a job, I'm concerned about people without jobs and unable to work because of various health issues, and those who

have lost their homes to the earthquake or tsunami and have no place to return to and no idea what to do.

They have managed to live so far with the compensation they receive from TEPCO for mental stress, but it is vital now more than ever to think about how to financially support these people.⁹ For example, instead of giving the same flat amount of financial support to all evacuees, we need to establish a system to grant support based on individual needs and circumstances. Unfortunately it is true that there are some who are not willing to support themselves even though they are capable, and are using the compensation to lead an idle life.

We appreciate the compensation since those who have been affected by the disaster have been suffering mental distress, but I think the time has come to reach out to and focus on the people in real need of help. Those capable of working should get jobs and stand on their own feet.

Hirano: So you think it is necessary and important to carefully differentiate individual needs and give assistance and support on a case-by-case basis.

Suzuki: Yes, I believe so.

Hirano: Have there been any discussions about this between the central and local governments?

Suzuki: No. Well, as the local government, I think it is very difficult to pursue. There will be residents who will complain, “so you are going to cut our compensation. You are going to abandon us. We are all residents of this town.” We will have to deal with problems like this, so it’s not going to be easy. I think it would be difficult for the local government to carry out such a policy.

If it is really true that it is now safe to return and restart life, as the central government has

said, I believe they should come up with a policy to encourage people to return by creating employment in Namie. If they do and provide job opportunities, I do think that more people would come back.

The best way to do so would be, I think, for the Japanese government to build national facilities in the evacuation areas, in Namie and elsewhere. Then former residents will be assured that the government decision to build indicates the safety of the area. But in reality there no government facilities have been built in this town. Since the accident, not a single facility has been built here. That leads residents to think that it is still not safe to live here, especially with Fukushima Daiichi not yet decommissioned. They feel that the absence of government facilities confirms this.

Hirano: It makes sense. If the central government insists that it is safe to return, if Prime Minister Abe’s pledge that Fukushima is under control is true, they need to take the initiative to show people that in fact it is now a safe place to live. Otherwise residents won’t be convinced.

Suzuki: Exactly. They should buy land from the town and actively start building government facilities to conduct research or to work on developmental plans. They should build housing for national government employees. Residents would then be reassured. I am not sure if it has something to do with evacuation orders or instructions, but right now there is a branch office of the Ministry of the Environment in Minami Soma city, far north of our town. The nearest office to the south is in Hirono town.

Hirano: In addition, as you mentioned before, it is also important to implement policies to educate people about the risk of nuclear power. In order to achieve that, both the central government and TEPCO need to end their cover-up culture. They need to explain all the possible risks to residents who wish to return,

and let them decide. Is that what Namie town local government hopes to do for its residents?

Suzuki: Yes, exactly. Part of what we call “risk communication” (*risukomi*, リスコミ) is, in a way, to give people some “negative” information. The government has been reluctant to pursue this, but it is crucial for people to be informed of any risks even if it has a potential negative impact on them, so that they can make their own decisions. We had been fed only positive information, but if something bad happens, we will know what to expect.

But as long as the reconstruction plans come from a Tokyo-centric perspective, Namie will have neither hopes nor dreams. As I’ve said many times, the only people coming back to town are elderly. Without young people, I believe, a town can’t be revived and reconstructed. The current policy seems to focus on merely bringing back people, but unless government can recreate a safe environment for young people, including children, beginning with complete decontamination, it’s hard to see any future. I’m not even sure, to be honest with you, if it’s possible to actually create a safe environment. Remember, it was the central government that told us that it would take responsibility to decontaminate and reconstruct.

For the local government that was forced to evacuate, it would have been much better and less stressful if we had been told not to live in this area for, say, the next thirty years and to find some other place to start a new life. They

could have given us some money to cover initial cost of moving and later compensation for losses. That way, we could transfer our resident certificates to a new town and receive full public services and benefits like other residents there. It would have been much better financially, as well.⁹

But the central government that took the initiative to promise that it would take full responsibility for decontamination and would bring us back to our hometowns. That’s why I believe it should put itself in the position of evacuees and take responsibility for what they are supposed to do to the end, instead of relying on the power of money.

Hirano: The evacuation orders will be lifted at the end of March 2017. This interview has revealed that there is still much more work to be done and many problems to resolve, and that the prospect for the future still remains unclear. It also gave us a chance to think again about for whom and for what the policies and slogans of “reconstruction” and “return” exist. We greatly appreciate your valuable time and opinion.

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Notes

¹ In April 2013, two years after the disaster, the Japanese government changed the limit of radioactive exposure dose from one milli-sievert per year (mSv/yr) or 0.23 micro-sievert per hour (μSv/h) to 20 mSv/yr or 3.8 μSv/h. This standard was roughly 6 times higher than that for “Radiation Controlled Areas.” The Labor standards act prohibits those under the age of 18 from working under these conditions. This new standard has been used only in Fukushima for determining evacuation zones as well as school grounds, buildings, and residential areas. The policy of zoning left (607) 743-2421 out over 260 “spots” in areas such as Minami Sōma-city, Date-city, and Kōzu-village whose radiation levels exceeded 20 mSv/yr. The government initially announced that the new standard would be used as an emergency measure and soon be lifted. Contrary to this announcement, however, 20 mSv/yr has virtually become the new standard for safety measure and return policies. On December 28, 2014, the Japanese government removed 142 areas in the city from the list, noting that annual radiation exposure had fallen below the 20 mSv/yr threshold. On April 17, 2015, some 530 residents of Minami Sōma filed a lawsuit demanding that the government revoke a decision to remove their districts from a list of radiation hot spots. This decision meant the ending of their entitlement to receive support in the form of subsidized medical treatment and “consolation” money. The plaintiffs argued that by international standards, the upper limit for radiation exposure was 1 mSv/yr, and thus the government’s decision to delist the hot spots based on a 20 mSv/yr standard betrayed its responsibility for protecting the safety of citizens. The government insisted that its decision was based on scientific findings. The government is now carrying out the return policies based on the same rationale. Evacuees who have lived in areas that are under 20 mSv/yr and expressed concerns about safety are regarded as “voluntary” and thus can receive very little financial support and compensation. With the lifting of evacuation orders in parts of Namie, Ōkuma, Iitate, and Tomioka at the end of March, 2017, they will not be allowed to stay in temporary housing. Even those who were originally ordered to evacuate will be considered “voluntary” after March 31, losing Fukushima prefecture’s financial aid for

housing. Many critics refer to the government's return policy as "forced return policy" as well as "*kimin seisaku*" or the "policy of abandoning people." See more details, Hino Kōsuke, *Genpatsu Kimin* (原発棄民), (Tokyo: Mainichi News Press, 2016).

² When I visited Namie in the summer of 2016 with a group of researchers of Niigata University, the radiation level in some backyards and a forest area ranged from 5~10 microsieverts per hour.

³ In 2012, Fukushima prefecture promised to build "reconstruction public housing" (*fukkō kōei jūtaku*, 復興公営住宅) in Iwaki-city, Minami Sōma-city, and Fukushima-city for evacuees. The temporary housing (*kasetsu jūtaku*, 仮設住宅) was originally expected to be in use only for 2 years until the construction of public housing. But due to central government hesitation to implement this plan as well as the increase in the cost of construction materials and worker outflow from Fukushima to Tokyo for the 2020 Olympics, the construction of the public housing was delayed and over 30,000 people are still living in the temporary housing. As reported in many media outlets, the conditions of temporary housing are far from desirable. The walls are paper-thin, and apartments are small. Furthermore, about 50,000 people are either living with relatives or renting apartments, unable to find new homes. According to the 2015 survey conducted by Fukushima prefecture, 62.1% of the 80,000 evacuees have health problems. 61.6 % are worried about the wellbeing of their families and themselves, 43.2% about their housing, 42.7% about their mental conditions, and 39.0% about the uncertain future and financial problems. When I interviewed evacuees from Namie at one of the temporary housing sites in Nihonmatsu, they expressed similar concerns. Now, with the lifting of evacuation orders, they will be forced to decide whether to return to their hometowns or find a new home within or outside Fukushima.

⁴ Hirono-town is about 20 kilometers from Fukushima-Daiichi. The Japanese government lifted the evacuation order in 2015. As of 2017, 2,897 out of 5,490 people have returned. Naraha-town is 16 kilometer from Fukushima-Daiichi and the evacuation order was lifted in September, 2015. 767 of 8,011 Haraha residents have returned to the town. Odaka-ku of Minami Sōma-city is also 16 kilometers from Fukushima Daiichi. The order was lifted in July, 2016. 1,329 of 12,842 Odaka-ku returned to the area.

⁵ The so-called "damages created by rumors" have become a major point of political contention since the nuclear disaster. Many farmers and businesses, not only in relatively unaffected areas of Fukushima but in other prefectures in northeastern Japan, have suffered substantial financial loss due to widespread concerns about being exposed to radiation. On the other hand, Liberal Democratic Party politicians and conservative media outlets have used the "rumor-caused damage" charge to silence criticism, warning against discussion of the real danger of external and internal radioactive exposure. Residents of Fukushima continue to live under the pressure of being accused of encouraging rumor-caused damage even though their concerns are legitimate and their efforts to raise awareness about radiation should be taken very seriously. Some right-wing internet bloggers call those who raise concerns about radiation "unpatriotic" or "anti-Japanese."

⁶ Ishihara Nobuteru, a son of former Tokyo mayor Ishihara Shintaro, then Minister of the Environment, made the infamous remark in June, 2014 during a Q and A session at the House of Councilors with regard to slow progress in persuading towns and villages to build intermediate nuclear waste storage facilities.

⁷ The Great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake occurred on January 17, 1995 in the southern part of

Hyogo prefecture, Japan. It measured 6.9 on the earthquake magnitude scale, claiming 6,434 lives, most of which were in Kobe, a major urban center with a population of 1.5 million.

⁸ In 2016, the Abe administration has decided to use taxpayer money for decontaminating affected areas in Fukushima. The decision marks a fundamental shift from the current policy that obliges TEPCO to pay for the decontamination work. The 2017 decontamination work is estimated to cost 30 billion yen. Behind the administration's decision for the use of taxpayer money is the rapidly expanding expense of decontamination, with the latest estimate rising from the original 2.5 trillion yen to 4 trillion. This estimate does not include the no-return zones. The government expects the planned work in those areas to cost roughly 300 billion yen over five years. The Abe administration's decision not only increase people's financial burden but also blur TEPCO's responsibility for the irretrievable damages it caused.

⁹ Each person receives from 100,000 to 120,000 yen per month as compensation for mental anguish in addition to compensation for the loss that varies significantly. The former compensation will end in 2018.

¹⁰ As stated in note 2, the Japanese government was reluctant to support the building of "reconstruction public housing." This was mainly because it was concerned that this would slow the return of evacuees to their hometowns and home villages. Hino Kōsuke writes in *Genpatsu Kimin* that Tokyo's reluctance indicates it is prioritizing the return policy over respecting evacuees' needs and concerns. Suzuki Yūichi's statement here expresses the same view.