

Lessons Learned from the 11 March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami: Perspectives from Filipinos in Japan

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Three months after the 11 March 2011 Magnitude 9 earthquake that triggered one of the worst tsunami events ever experienced in Japanese history, a team of Filipino and Japanese scientists interviewed fifty (50) Filipinos who survived the event. The Filipino survivors were interviewed between June to August 2011. Most of the Filipinos interviewed have been residents of Japan for as short as 2 years to as long as 36 years. The purpose of the interviews was to gather first-hand survivors and eyewitnesses accounts of the so that valuable lessons from this event in terms of awareness, preparedness and response can be highlighted.

The video-documented interviews aimed to gather from the field, technical information on the impacts of the earthquake and tsunami. The interviews specifically focused on determining what worked and did not seem to have worked on the existing warning and communication system on the national level as well as community level during the event. The interviews took into account an understanding of both the hardware system and message content during emergencies as practiced in Japan. One significant observation is that the content of pre-disaster earthquake and tsunami awareness campaigns did not have much information on scenario impacts, timing between the earthquake occurrence and arrival of tsunami, and lacked emphasis on intuitive observations of the natural signs for people to understand the phenomena and make proper individual response. Pre-disaster activities put too much emphasis on evacuation drills and procedures and this led to much dependence on public address systems and sirens (once siren is heard, go to identified evacuation site). The existence of seawalls in some areas also provided false sense of security. The constant triggering-off of the public sirens even during minor earthquake events and "no impacts" observed even after issuance of warnings for possible tsunamis through time, may have also contributed to the kind of response by some people at the crucial time when the big event finally occurred.

Although very tragic in its impacts, the event gave the opportunity to review existing procedure and systems in the Philippine setting. The lessons learned can be used in the current earthquake and tsunami awareness and preparedness program in the Philippines that emphasizes understanding and observations of the natural signs especially for locally-generated events, and encourages the establishment of community-based early warning system.