

A narrative-based study on migrants behavior and response to disasters: 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and the Filipino students

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Disasters are never isolated events that individuals and communities faced. They come as compounded problems resulting from one tragedy after another. This case happened during the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake shook the main island of Japan. Compounding this disaster was a massive tsunami that hit the Tohoku region minutes after this seismic catastrophe. As if such double devastations were not enough, the following days were raved with threats of nuclear turmoil as the Fukushima Nuclear Plant was damaged as well. The forceful earthquake and tsunami left thousands defenseless, frightened of recurring aftershocks, at the same time apprehensive of the sporadically behaving damaged nuclear plant. The triple tragedy of the earthquake-tsunami-nuclear radiation posed threat to personal safety and heightened sense of vulnerability for affected communities.

Based on the social vulnerability paradigm, migrants are among the vulnerable population during disasters. However, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2012), non-nationals, especially migrant workers and their families, have often remained invisible and thus not been accounted for humanitarian response mechanisms during disasters.

This study explores the vulnerabilities and capacities of migrants that dictate their behavior and response during natural-technological accidents and disasters. A qualitative study was conducted based on the disaster narratives of thirty (30) Filipino students from both Tohoku and Tokyo area who experienced the March 11, 2011 disaster. Together with this is the review of the Facebook page for the Filipino students in Japan within a year and a half period since the day of the Tohoku Earthquake.

Both from the interviews and analysis of the social media page, findings showed that these composites of disasters, risks, and hazards developed certain degrees of vulnerability for migrants. Based on the experience of the Filipino students, occasional earthquake is part of living in Japan. However, the magnitude and the effects thereafter were not likely foreseen, such as the tsunami and the nuclear crisis in Fukushima. Beyond the interest to know about facts regarding nuclear plants and radiation there was the interest to ascertain and comprehend the possible effects of a nuclear melt down and the damages that will result from such event (both immediate and long term).

The Facebook page reviewed from March 11, 2011 to September of 2012 showed it was primarily used as site for information gathering and sharing information about the earthquake, aftershocks, nuclear radiation, and other concerns on personal safety. Out of the 804 posts during this period, there were 288 posts about Japan 3.11, with 208 posts made in the next three weeks after the March 11, 2011 earthquake. It covered leading issues such as radiation, earthquake, Filipino students, assistance, safety, and departure, among other concerns. Radiation had been the most discussed theme in the page and even in the interviews. The Facebook page was used to post opportunities for support and assistance to other Filipino students and members of the Filipino community who necessitated assistance. This natural-technological disaster experience of Filipino students during the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake activated the sense of collective action among their co-nationals both in the physical and online platform. Information sharing had been one of the key medium to extend assistance especially to address the issue of nuclear radiation.

While this study is limited to the experiences of a certain group of migrants, it provided a potential to further study and look into the active behaviors of other nationals and/or other migrant groups (i.e. migrant workers, long term residents) during disasters. Also, the study presented a perspective on human vulnerabilities and capacities in addressing complex disasters.

Keywords: 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, migrants, foreign students