

Reflections: Disaster Recovery from the Heart

Stories of Disaster Recovery, Solidarity and Survival

By **Suvendrini KAKUCHI**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Regional Asia-Pacific ASPnet project for Japan Solidarity and Disaster Risk Reduction in Education (“Japan Solidarity Project”) was generously funded by Japanese Funds-in-Trust (JFIT) and co-ordinated by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organizations Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education (UNESCO Bangkok). It saw thousands of messages of solidarity and understanding sent by students in ASPnet schools across the Asia-Pacific to their counterparts in the Tohoku region of northeast Japan that were affected by the massive East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster on 11 March 2011.

The message exchange was aimed at building hope and resilience among children and teenagers who witnessed one of the most terrifying natural disasters in modern world history. Hundreds of peaceful communities living along the picturesque shores of the Pacific Ocean, in an area that also produces much of Japan’s famed seafood, lost their lives, homes and livelihoods when a tsunami as high as 20-30 metres meters followed the magnitude 9.0 earthquake devastating the coastline. The rebuilding of spirits in the aftermath of this tragedy remains a daunting task for Japan.

The Japan Solidarity Project has contributed to an increased exposure to and understanding of disaster risk reduction (DRR) education amongst participating teachers and learners in the Asia-Pacific region.

The purpose of this publication is to provide a brief narrative of the disaster and recovery process and to reflect upon the solidarity message exchange under the Japan Solidarity Project. It is based on interviews and surveys carried out in schools in the affected area in Japan and in ASPnet schools in the Asia-Pacific region who took part in the project. The majority of these schools have responded positively to the project and indicated a desire to continue the message exchange so that similar support might be demonstrated for other countries that suffer from a natural disaster.

DISASTER

Arahama Elementary School is located in Sendai City in Miyagi Prefecture, less than a kilometre from the ocean. When the massive earthquake struck at 2.15 p.m., 11 March 2011, Chieko Tada, the sixth grade teacher at the school, faced the most dramatic moment of her life. She recalls a year later,

I was with my 23 students in grade six when the school began to shake uncontrollably. Soon after there came the tsunami warnings but while the announcements urged us to escape, we did not anticipate the height of the waves. The announcer continued to send us information and parents started appearing to pick up their children.

What followed next was a tragedy no one expected.

Before March 11, tall pine trees had lined the beach blocking the view of the ocean. “But that day the waves rose so high they were suddenly visible,” she said, her voice quivering. “It was the children who noticed the black waves that emerged over the trees for the first time in our lives.” She said that her young students kept repeating “the sea, the sea,” as if they were in a trance or could not believe what was happening.

The raging waters flooded the school building up to the second floor. As cars and houses were being swept away before their very eyes, Tada recalled that

the children were clinging to me, some of them crying as the adults herded them to the roof-top to safety. They were pointing to their houses and expressing fear that their grandparents may have died. I pulled them away from the window. I wanted to spare them from such a hideous sight. It was too shocking even for adults.

There was a 20 to 30 minute lull between the earthquake and the emergence of the three-wave tsunami. Today, the survivors in Tohoku describe that period of time as the end and beginning of two markedly different periods in their lives.

Shizugawa Junior High School is located on a hill facing the coastline of Minamisanriku, north of Sendai. Sa-dayoshi Sugawara, the school principal recalled that on 11 March his school had been busy practicing for the school graduation when the disaster struck. “The mood of celebration was hastily abandoned as the rocking of the school became harder. I knew then that this quake was not going to be like the usual quakes. We had to change from preparations for a celebration to preparations for a catastrophe,” he said.

That day, Mr. Sugawara was forced to direct emergency procedures for 550 people including members of the local community who sought safety in the school, a designated emergency evacuation site. The night was bitterly cold with snow falls riding upon a north wind that blew ferociously through the hills as the students and local evacuees took shelter inside the building. The electricity had failed and there were no blankets and no water. The evacuees were frightened and anxious about their loved ones whom they hoped to see the next day. Sugawara had turned his office into a nursery for infants and their mothers and he explained that the students were extremely frightened, crying and calling for help. “My priority was to calm the people. I walked around the school turning classrooms into shelters and talking to everyone to make sure their needs were being looked after as best as we could” he explained.

Interviews conducted in schools that were affected by the disaster illustrate many such stories of profound sadness. A recurring remark among survivors relating to the enormity of the disaster was that such a giant tsunami had not been experienced in living memory; and was not even considered in the standard national disaster protection manuals and drills that had been followed to that day.

RECOVERY

Over 18,900 people died or went missing in the disaster and over 900,000 properties were damaged or destroyed¹ as a result of the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and the 20-30 meter high tsunami that followed. The disaster left behind thousands of families with only a single parent, destroyed schools and homes, and burdened a vast number of communities with the uphill task of restarting their lives from what was often nothing more than a pile of rubble. Japan is an earthquake prone country with access to state-of-the-art quake preparedness and disaster warning technologies. Despite this, the disaster shook the nation, including its economic, political and social fabric, to its core. The devastation of more than 500 kilometres of coastal settlements caused widespread displacement and disrupted the proud and independent tradition of the Tohoku region, which was home to close-knit fishing and farming communities that had lived together for generations.

Stories recounted by school staff and students in the Tohoku region echo a deep sense of loss, yet also attest to the strong sense of community spirit that still prevails. This spirit has been widely recognized as a key source of resilience for the people of Tohoku and is exemplified in the inspiring way in which the survivors have come together during the recovery process.

For example, the media has documented widespread compassionate acts such as the sharing of rice balls among children and the elderly while they waited several days for food supplies to arrive. Other stories of self-sacrifice tell how teachers and community leaders decided to stay with frightened students at school evacuation centres rather than search for their own missing families. Yet another poignant example of such community strength was displayed in crowded evacuation centres soon after the disaster, where people insisted on there being no partitions set up between the families in order to make it easier to watch over and help one another. Says Abe Fumio, the wife of a local fisherman from Minamisanriku, “We have emerged from a disaster that has shown us the fragility of life and made us realize deeply, once again, the preciousness of caring for one another.”

The difficulty that Japanese teachers had in trying to provide safety for their students during the earthquake and tsunami continues to haunt them a year later. In a particularly devastating memory, Cheiko Tada recalled that the disaster struck after a long period of service in her school in which she had built a close relationship with her students and their families.

It was my last year at Arahama Elementary School after seven years of service. My last wish before my impending transfer to another public school was to give everyone a proper goodbye. But then the disaster came and dashed away that hope. We ended the school year on 11 March in a way that has deeply saddened me. The community was divided and children dispersed into evacuation centres or in other areas. The loss of community for the disaster-affected people in Tohoku is one of the most excruciating aspects of the tragedy.

In the days and weeks following the disaster, while students and teachers were struggling to come to terms with the scale of the devastation around them, aid from foreign countries poured into Japan in the form of rescue teams, emergency goods, cash donations and volunteers. The people of Tohoku embarked on a recovery programme in a heroic effort to restore the once thriving industrial, fishing and agricultural sectors that the region had been home to. However, psychological support for the survivors of the East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster has also been identified as an important element of national recovery strategy, particularly as a means of recovering from the loss of loved ones and rebuilding a sense of community.

Abe Kazuhiko, the social studies teacher at Ongawa Dai-ichi Junior High School which served as an evacuation centre for the devastated Onagawa district, explained in an interview that his recovery from the disaster has been deeply linked to the resilience of his students. “Our school is a family that shares deep bonds. When I see the children recovering and responding to our care, I realize this is what makes me happy and makes me look ahead to a better future,” he explained.

SOLIDARITY

The exchange of solidarity messages under the coordination of UNESCO Bangkok and ACCU in Tokyo is part of the international effort to support the recovery of those who have been affected by the disaster. Sympathetic learners and educators from ASPnet schools in Japan and the wider Asia-Pacific region who had watched the devastation in the media, were called into action by the “Japan Solidarity Project”. They created whole-school messages on behalf of more than 190,000 students from 12 countries which were sent to the affected schools via ASPnet National Coordinators and the ACCU.

Taking the form of letters, postcards, posters, banners, handicrafts, emails and video clips and songs, the messages conveyed solidarity, hope and remembrance from the giver to the receiver. Uppermost in the minds of the young message givers, who ranged from primary to high school grades, appeared to be the necessity to convey to their devastated friends the importance of “not giving up” and “fighting” to over-

come the terrible tragedy. Words and phrases also contained the importance of being “positive” and “to have courage.” There were also sentiments of sorrow expressed gently in words such as “our thoughts are with you”; and the Japanese recipients were warmly addressed as “brothers and sisters” or “friends”. Also among this flood of goodwill were handwritten poems and stories that expressed a shared understanding of the emotional toll wrought by disasters which had also occurred in their own countries and own regions.

A message from Thailand, for example, referring to the frightening time when floods devastated the country in late 2011, encouraged the recipient not to lose hope. Among the contributions from Nepalese students were carefully hand written stories that shared with the Japanese recipients beautiful folk tales and moving real-life stories of their own countries and families experience with disaster. They detailed both the suffering as well as the caring they had experienced. Other notes talked simply and directly of the need to be prepared for disasters, such as the importance of having a torch and first aid on hand at all times.

Ira Fasa, an English teacher and Dean of Academic Affairs in SMA Labschool Cibubur, Indonesia, explained in an interview that the development of messages among the students in her school became a crucial learning experience not only for the students but also for herself and the teachers who lead the programme. “It was not a difficult process to encourage the students to participate in the project. They had seen the devastation already on their television screens and when we gathered to discuss the process of sending messages they reacted with strong enthusiasm at the prospect of connecting with the students who had been affected,” she said.

The schools activities as part of the Japan Solidarity Project were held in the Japanese language class and lasted two weeks in an effort to complete almost 150 messages. Fasa says the activities began with discussions with students about disasters and their aftermath of the physical losses and the emotional upheaval of losing loved ones, homes and livelihoods that form the foundations of stability. “The trauma of their Japanese colleagues was easily shared by the children when we spoke about connecting the tragedy to their own feelings in the event of them losing their own siblings. A lot of our discussions also went on to acknowledge the crucial aspect of emotional support at this time. They were totally absorbed,” said Fasa.

Participating students talked at length about disasters they have experienced in their own countries, such as floods and cyclones in Bangladesh. They shared information about the kind of disaster drills they conduct in their own schools. Above all, they expressed strong satisfaction that they had the chance to send their thoughts to their peers in Japan at a time of need. Similar sentiments have been noted by several participating schools. ASPnet National Coordinator of the Philippines, Professor Allan Mabunga, said that Filipino schools participated actively and made determined efforts to convey their emotional support in their messages. “Youth react emotionally to disasters and this is what makes peer support so valuable for disaster recovery. Solidarity is conveyed best in this way,” he said.

It is important to note that while the Japan Solidarity Project unambiguously refrained from pressuring affected schools to respond to the messages outside of their own initiative, the solidarity exchange was not a one-way process. Some examples of the first replies sent by the students of Sendai Ikuei Gakuen High School to Bangladesh ASPnet schools included: “We are deeply grateful for your kindness,” “Your messages made us vigorous,” “Let’s work together!” and “We do hope you will be able to visit us soon.” In addition, ASPnet schools that participated in the project said it was an enriching exercise in developing solidarity, team building and learning within the context of natural hazards and disasters for their schools.

An English teacher from Sendai Ikuei Gakuen School, Mika Kawauchi, said that when she handed over the messages to her class, they received them with ripples of excitement because it was the first time they had received words of encouragement from students abroad. “The children were extremely happy that day. They were also eager to read the English messages because they were studying the language and realized what a great opportunity it was to be in touch internationally,” she explained. When Ms. Kawauchi suggested that they reply to the messages, the class embraced the idea wholeheartedly. They decided to first

learn some important facts about Bangladesh and research the Bangladesh national flag² and then set about in groups to write their messages. "It was a wonderful class that day," said Kawauchi.

Messages sent from Korean ASPnet schools to Yoriiso Primary School in Ishinomaki-City are now proudly displayed in the school lobby. Atsushi Ishigaki, the teacher who was in charge of the schools solidarity exchange activities, expressed strong support for the Japan Solidarity Project, which has been described as a huge source of solace for the students. "The messages are beautiful and the children are deeply appreciative of the huge effort taken by their friends in Korea," he said. The messages were presented to the students by the principal on graduation day, a day that marked a landmark in recovery in the school. "There was absolutely no sadness in the students response to the messages," Mr. Ishigaki stressed. "Instead, I observed their spontaneous happiness when they knew there are students of their age who had wanted to express their feelings of solidarity. Such student-to-student exchanges are the best way to uplift their spirits."

Solidarity messages to Ongawa Dai-ichi Junior High School were also hugely appreciated. Mr. Abe, the social science teacher, said he handed over messages from Republic of Korea and Thailand to his class and asked the students to look at them carefully. "I wanted to give them time to reflect on the messages, not only to understand the English language which is still alien to them, but also to quietly savour the deep sentiments of their foreign friends. Messages are a powerful medium for building resilience and this is the reason why I conducted the class that way," he said.

Mr. Abe has striven to develop a way for his young students to face the trauma they have undergone as a result of the disaster. "In Japan, it is common in society to not talk to others about their suffering. There is strong social pressure to hide your mental pain from others. I thought this time we should try our best to share our experience with others. This process, I believe, speeds up the healing process in the children," he explained. Mr. Abes' students have been invited to other parts of Japan to speak about the Tohoku disaster in public. Their retelling of their uphill struggle to cope with the loss of their former lives and the hardships they have endured in evacuation sites and now in temporary shelters, have endeared them to the Japanese public and has gone a long way to healing their emotional scars and building their self-confidence in the process.

SURVIVAL

One year on from the disaster, Arahama Elementary School unleashes harrowing memories for those who visit it. The school is one of two in the district that have been closed since the disaster, the local community having dispersed, students enrolled in other schools, and families relocated to temporary housing or moved to other areas. Classrooms are silent but they still contain shattered glass and wood, posters, books, desks and chairs that have been neatly stacked in corners. Walking through the silent corridors, past the piles of debris that contain shoes, torn blankets and blocks of crushed cement, one can feel the power of the tsunami whose waves engulfed the school and its helpless inhabitants. The large windows that lined the school are no more, but through them, the vast Pacific Ocean, now at rest, can be seen in the distance.

Japanese teachers participating in the Solidarity Message programme said their students continue to deal with lingering trauma in varying degrees one year after the disaster. Mr. Abe from Ongawa Dai-ichi Junior High School explains that his students are locked in a constant battle with sadness because they face the tragedy on a daily basis; the piles of debris that remind them of the disaster, their cramped temporary homes, and their parents anxiety after losing their jobs. Many devastated areas also remain ghost towns, with rebuilding taking a long time. Teachers speak of their own frustrations at their inability to provide enough support to students who have lost their parents, and of their determination to look for better ways of gaining solace to cope with the vast emotional toll of the disaster.

2 The Bangladesh national flag resembles the Japanese national flag in many ways, which emerged as a common theme in the solidarity messages that were sent to Japan by the students of Bangladesh ASPnet schools!

ASPnet National Coordinator of Republic of Korea, Hyunsook Seo, said that students who participated in the Japan Solidarity Project expressed a sense of belonging to the ASPnet community and of the need to support their peers in the group. “They considered themselves as being a part of a big family,” she said. In Japan, teachers say they have observed that curriculums incorporating learning about disasters and risk reduction have been critical in fostering student participation in evacuation drills, and were, perhaps, responsible for saving many lives during the 11 March 2011 disaster.

A meeting between students and teachers at Udayan High School in Dhaka shortly after the conclusion of the solidarity activity highlighted its strong impact in raising awareness about disasters. The students reacted with enthusiasm to the replies sent from the Japanese Sendai Ikuei Gakuen High School. They pressed the present author, who witnessed the delivery of the messages, for answers about the recovery process in Tohoku and were keen to know the progress their Japanese friends were making. Many of the questions sought answers about the risk of hazards such as earthquakes and tsunamis in Japan, and the preparations that have been made both in and outside of schools and society there towards disaster risk reduction.

REFLECTIONS

The Asia-Pacific region is an area that continues to experience a wide variety of natural disasters which disproportionately affect young people³. Thus, it is fitting that UNISDR’s theme in 2011 is “Making Children and Young People Partners for Disaster Risk Reduction”, which strongly highlights the severe impact that disasters have on young people. Against this backdrop, a consensus has emerged among the Japanese and Asia-Pacific participants of the Japan Solidarity Project on the need for reflection on the positive outcomes of the project, and in particular the solidarity exchange. This will help determine whether its activities have contributed to the healing of the young people who were affected by the 2011 East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster.

The indications from interviews and surveys conducted after the conclusion of the project are that it has very likely been effective in this regard. In addition, there have been many responses in the post-activity surveys and interviews that ask for further exchanges between schools to sustain the international friendships and understanding that have been built. “It would be a great pity if the solidarity exchange ended in May with the end of the project,” said Ms. Kawauchi from Sendai Ikuei Gakuen High School. Ms. Fasa from Indonesia commented on her students eagerness to meet with their Japanese peers whom they have written to, and judging by the replies of the students from the affected area in Japan, that desire is well reciprocated.

Teachers from schools that received solidarity messages reported a variety of methods that were used to revisit the disaster in the classroom with sensitivity. Ms. Kawauchi says she did not encourage an open discussion in the classroom focusing on the suffering the students had experienced. This was mainly due to the wide disparities in personal loss within the classroom with some students having lost either one or both of their parents as well as their homes, while others survived with only minor damage and loss. She pointed out, however, that the solidarity messages presented an opportunity for the class to talk about the tragedy in a less direct manner. “The messages from Bangladesh referred to their own disasters and so I used the opportunity to discuss the meaning of survival without referring to the Tohoku disaster,” she said. “Overall, I am grateful for the messages; they presented a much needed opportunity.”

Principal Sugawara from Shizugawa Junior High School in Minamisanriku, was also positive about the outcome of the project, but in an interview shared some constructive criticism of the solidarity exchange activities. He explained that messages of encouragement had flooded his school for several months just as teachers had scrambled to rebuild the lives of their shattered students; and that while the endless stream of goodwill from others, including foreign countries, was welcomed at first, over time they could become a burden. “The best messages are those sent by people who do not expect replies because the teachers

are simply too busy," he pointed out. He did express appreciation for the sharing of disaster experiences, however, which he feels is crucial for building more effective protection measures. Mr. Sugawara has spent much of his time since the disaster disseminating his ideas and opinions on DRR in the school newsletter as well as at government policy forums, a task he hopes will lead to better disaster protection policies, better equipped evacuation centres, and quicker response times.

In general, surveys collected from teachers in participating ASPnet schools as well as interviews with affected schools in Japan illustrate that the Japan Solidarity Project has heightened awareness about disaster risk in schools outside of Japan, particularly in those that have not experienced disasters before. Interviews conducted with participating ASPnet schools showed that concrete activities, including collaborative hazard mapping, evacuation and fire fighting drills, and the preparation of emergency kits, were implemented in classrooms alongside lessons on the science of hazards such as earthquakes and tsunamis. A crucial lesson learned by the students that was reflected in the surveys was on the often unexpected nature of hazards, and thus the vital necessity of being prepared for them to minimize the risk of disaster. Japanese schools also reported that the messages have underscored the importance of community and peer support in fostering a speedier and more effective process of individual and collective recovery.

The UNESCO initiated and co-ordinated Japan Solidarity Project was developed on the premise that disaster recovery requires more than financial support from the international community. The project aimed to support the emotional recovery of disaster survivors through the exchange of messages of solidarity, hope and remembrance by school-age youth and teachers in the Asia-Pacific region. The diverse but predominately enthusiastic responses from the participants in the solidarity message exchange process, have indicated its positive role in the ongoing healing process that is taking place in Japan.

AUTHORS NOTE

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the panel of experts who have guided and assisted me in collecting the information for this report and who have shared their contacts in the disaster-affected areas. The courageous oral testimonies that I have heard over the course of the Japan Solidarity Project have provided invaluable insights for all of humanity into one of the worst disasters in modern history and its impact upon students and teachers.

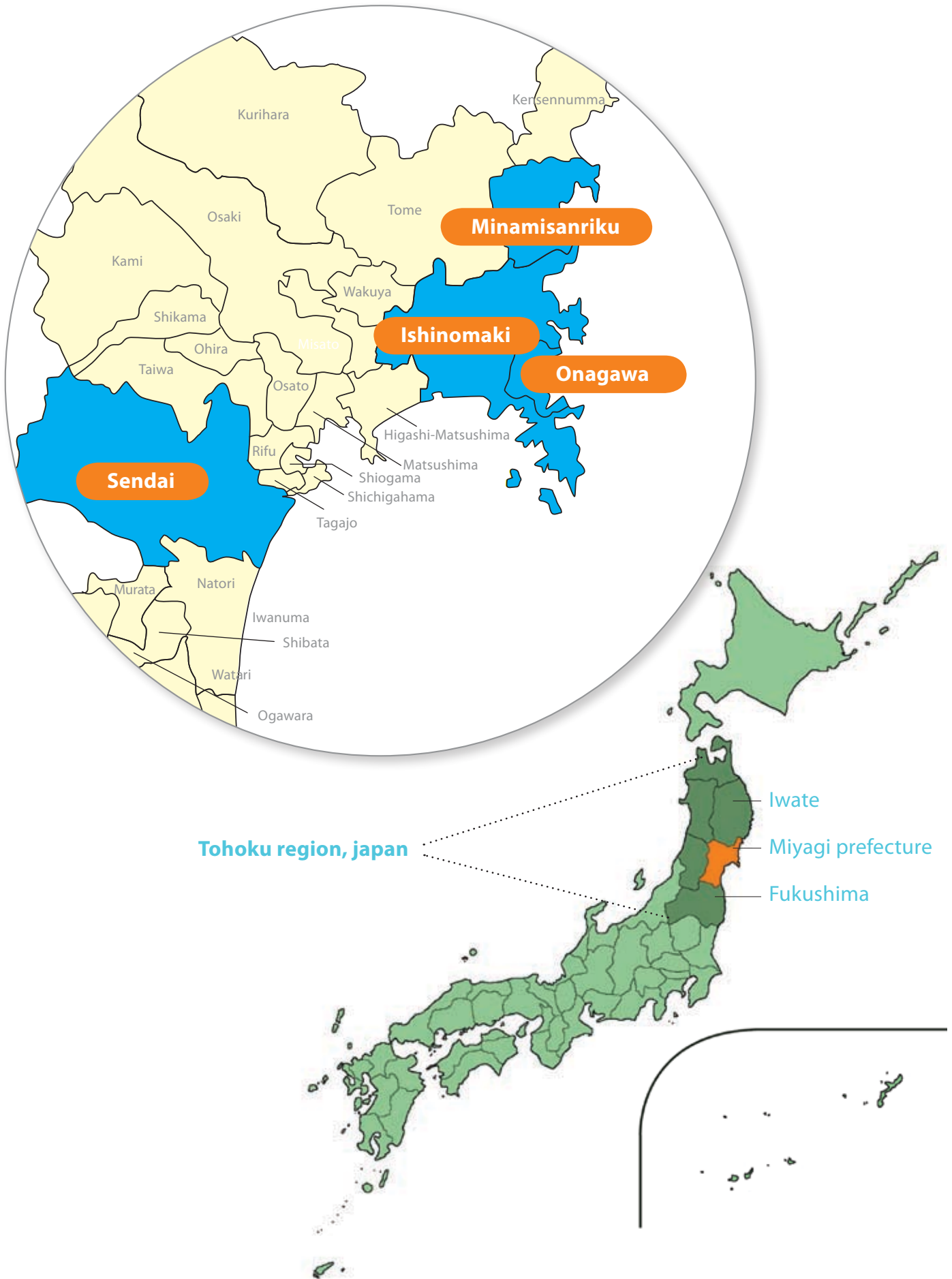
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASPnet	UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network
ACCU	Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
JFIT	Japanese Funds-in-Trust
SMA	Sekolah Menengah Atas (Indonesian preparatory school)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Childrens Fund
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

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For more information, please contact: UNESCO Bangkok, 920 Sukhumvit Road, Prakanong, Bangkok 10110, Thailand.

Tel: +66 2 3910577 Fax: +66 2 3910866

E-mail: bangkok@unesco.org.