

# Rebuilding the Tsunami-Stricken Onagawa Town

*In five to ten years, Onagawa will either turn into a ghost town or a lively town – no in-between. If the rebuilding proposal on which we have worked on for the past one or two years succeeds, I think we can bring back a relatively populated and vibrant town. If it fails, Onagawa will be deserted.*

- Yoshihide Abe, CEO, Umemaru Newspapers

*Stay, return and come to live in Onagawa – these are the three main themes of our municipal rebuilding plan... People need to come to live in Onagawa – here we mean young people, outsiders and “fools” - and without these people Onagawa won’t be rebuilt. However much old-timers like me and Yoshihide (Abe) think hard, we cannot help but be influenced by the old Onagawa. We need the “fools” who can overturn our plan and create something totally new.*

- Takahiro Aoyama, bureau chief, Restoration Coordination Association (FRK)

On a still chilly spring day in the middle of April 2013, Yoshihide Abe (age 45<sup>1</sup>) was looking over the town of Onagawa from the parking lot of the Onagawa Medical Center on a hill. Over two years had passed since the tsunami had destroyed about 70% of the houses and buildings and taken 827 lives, about 9% of the town’s entire population, on March 11, 2011. With the debris and rubble cleared away, the town’s former downtown district had been bulldozed over, and was now all raw land except for three afflicted buildings which would be preserved for posterity. The construction to elevate the entire city by 5.4 meters by installing mounds was underway.

Abe was a leading figure in a group of younger business operators based in Onagawa who had risen up after the tsunami to restore the totally devastated town. He had been working tirelessly to accelerate the speed of restoration in collaboration with major business associations in Onagawa. Thanks to the leadership of these local business operators like Abe, it was said that Onagawa had been restored faster than any other disaster-stricken community – the town had quickly developed and agreed on its own municipal rebuilding plan, and had implemented actions accordingly. The town was now working on developing the central shopping district in front of the Onagawa station, in time for the reopening of the station and recovery of railroad service in two years.

The images of the shopping mall in Nagata district, Kobe city, were burned in Abe’s mind. After the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 which killed about 5,000 people, Kobe city invested a huge amount of money to build a large-scale upscale shopping mall in Nagata district where fire from the earthquake had destroyed existing buildings. However, the number of customers kept declining; you would see only shuttered stores and find no people in the nicely designed shopping mall.

Abe and his friends had been working as hard as they could, without taking rest since the disaster, for a better future for Onagawa. But would the rebuilding plan they had developed really help Onagawa become a town where people would like to stay, return and come? Could Onagawa avoid repeating the mistakes made in Nagata district? What should they do or should not do? Abe, nor anyone else, had an answer.

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<sup>1</sup> As of July 2013.

## **Onagawa Town**

Onagawa, located in Ojika county of Miyagi prefecture, was a town surrounded by mountains and sea. The town's main industry had been fishing and many fishermen had come to live in the town. As the fishing industry started to decline in Japan in the 1970s, the town decided to invite a nuclear power plant. People in the construction and utility industries came to live in Onagawa. Using subsidies provided for hosting the nuclear power plant and tax revenues coming from nuclear power plant-related businesses, Onagawa set up a self-sustainable cycle – the town constructed athletic and tourist facilities and attracted visitors from outside to Onagawa who would then spend money in the town. When Ishinomaki city, Onagawa's neighboring city, merged with six surrounding towns to become the second largest city in Miyagi prefecture in 2005, Onagawa chose to remain independent, refusing to join Ishinomaki city. As a result, Onagawa was like an enclave within Ishinomaki city (see **Exhibit 1** for a map).

Like many other rural cities and towns in Japan, Onagawa had problems such as population decline and rapid aging. Young people who wished to receive advanced education would go to high schools in nearby Ishinomaki city and then on to college, never to return to Onagawa. The town had a population of about 16,000 in 1980, which declined to 10,000 in 2010 and the ratio of elderly people (over 65) was 33.8%.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, a local bank published a projection that by 2035 Onagawa's population would become about 6,000. Sharing a sense of crisis that the town's economy would collapse with such a rapidly declining population, leading business operators in Onagawa launched "the town building study group" in June 2010, with the town's chamber of commerce serving as coordinator. Together with people from the local municipality, they launched discussions on how they could put a stop to such population decline.

## **Great East Japan Earthquake**

On March 11 2011, a 14.8-meter tsunami<sup>2</sup> hit Onagawa town where the central district was squeezed into a narrow strip of land between the sea and mountains, destroying about 70% of the town and taking the lives of 9% of the town's population (see **Exhibit 2**). It was the most severely damaged town among all tsunami-affected coastal cities and towns (see **Exhibit 3**). While the mayor and municipal workers evacuated to the roof and survived, the town hall was hit by the tsunami and damaged up to the top floor. After the disaster, the population rapidly decreased and the scenario they had predicted for 2035 became the new reality.

The Onagawa nuclear power plant operated by Tohoku Electric Power was hit by a tsunami with the same height as one which hit TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. However, since it was located 15 meters above sea level, the Onagawa plant did not lose its external power supply and no radiation leaks occurred.<sup>3</sup> While the 2,000 people who took shelter in a building on a hill in the town had to spend about a week without water or food, the 364 people who took shelter in

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<sup>2</sup> Some say that the tsunami was as high as 20 meters above sea level.

<sup>3</sup> The nuclear regulatory commission announced in July 2013 that the severity of the accident at Onagawa nuclear power plant was "Level 2". The building containing the reactor took in seawater, and three pumps and two emergency power generators stopped working.

the Onagawa power plant were able to receive aid supplies immediately after the disaster and had relatively comfortable refugee life.

## **Private Sector Initiatives**

The Onagawa municipal government was not able to take action immediately after the disaster, as the town hall had been severely hit by the tsunami. On the other hand, Onagawa's private sector was quick to respond. Abe, who was running a newspaper distribution center, started to deliver newspapers to houses which were not affected only three days after the disaster. The headquarters of Takamasa, a leading business operator in Onagawa that manufactured and sold fish sausage, was one of those which the tsunami had not struck, and it naturally became a hub of people and of information. When Abe visited Takamasa to deliver the newspaper, Takamasa's CEO, Masanori Takahashi, told him, "Please gather young business operators – we are going to have a meeting to discuss what we can do for the future of Onagawa." Abe went around the town to share the meeting details in person, with those he thought should attend the meeting. The meeting was the beginning of the town's rebuilding initiative driven by the private sector.

The temporary offices of four major business associations in Onagawa, including the chamber of commerce, the tourism association, the fish processing association and the fish wholesalers' association, were immediately built on Takamasa's property. Then, on April 19, the Reconstruction Coordination Association (FRK) was launched, as a vehicle for the private sector to advise the municipal government on how to proceed with the town's reconstruction. Takahiro Aoyama (age 40) of the chamber of commerce, who had been running the town building study group, became the bureau chief of FRK. Aoyama explained that Onagawa was quick to set up FRK because it already had the study group experience.

Many business operators in Onagawa took action on their own initiative. For example, the president of a local construction company thought it would be critical to secure a road for trucks delivering aid supplies, and started to clear debris and rubble using the cranes he owned. Four days after the disaster, a road wide enough for one vehicle to pass through had been secured, allowing the Self Defense Force (SDF) to deliver aid supplies by truck to the public gymnasium in which about 2,000 people had taken shelter. Before that, the SDF could only deliver supplies by helicopter and could not deliver sufficient aid to the gymnasium. Another example was that the younger generation, who had been busy working and happy to leave community matters to the older generation before the disaster, voluntarily formed a neighborhood watch to patrol the town for a month. Abe noted:

I went to Ishinomaki city a few days after the disaster in order to pick up newspapers. There I saw that many cranes were just left on the street without being used. I was puzzled – in Onagawa all cranes were fully utilized, but why on earth did people in Ishinomaki not use available cranes to clear debris and rubble on their own? If a city becomes too big, do people start thinking, "Somebody else or the municipal government will take care of it," and draw a line on what they can do?

Onagawa has the spirit of self-help. We do what we can do. After the disaster, Onagawa residents took action, thinking of what we could do. There were so many people like that. Of course, back then, given the

severity of the disaster, it was just impossible to assume that someone else would come to take care of us.

While working together as FRK to develop a proposal for reconstruction, each business association came up with its own action plans and put them into practice quickly. On April 1, the wholesaler association restarted the fish market. On the same day, the chamber of commerce opened a shopping mall which had been set up using donated cargo containers. Abe, who had played a central role in opening the container shopping mall, recalled:

If it had been run by the government, it would have taken much longer as the overriding principle of the public sector is equality – they would have had to gather all business operators and let them draw lots. But as it was a private sector initiative, we were able to move things forward quickly. We chose who should be tenants of the shopping mall and asked them to join one by one. What we needed most back then was flowers to pay respect at the graves of the newly deceased. We also needed stores to sell vegetables and food as there were no stores left within walking distance from the shelter. Then, we would invite pubs and restaurants.

In early May, a market was held at the playground of Onagawa high school, which attracted many people. Inspired by the event, a plan to build a temporary shopping mall was launched, which later became “Bell for Hope Shopping Mall,” the largest temporary shopping mall in Japan (opened in April 2012).

## **Onagawa Reconstruction Vision**

In September 2011, Onagawa town agreed on and announced its reconstruction plan. The town would be zoned into several districts; the commercial area would be placed close to the sea and residential areas would be built on a hill. Tall levees would not be built but instead the entire town would be elevated 5-15 meters by mounds (see **Exhibit 4** for the plan). Based on this reconstruction plan which reflected proposals from FRK, FRK started to discuss how to actually design the town at monthly all-hands gatherings and task force meetings, and made proposals to the municipal government.

However, as the Onagawa municipal government started to resume operation, FRK found that their proposals were often rejected without review. FRK, a group of business operators, concluded that in order for the town to be restored in a speedy manner, the town would need a new mayor with flexibility and quick decision-making ability. FRK then worked to calling a mayoral election which had been postponed by the disaster and fielded a candidate, Yoshiaki Suda (age 39), then a Miyagi prefectural assembly member from Onagawa. Suda was elected at the election held in November 2011. Two deputy mayors were newly assigned to support Suda in responding to urgent tasks. After Suda became mayor, “things started to move more smoothly,” said Aoyama.

In January 2012, FRK submitted to the mayor and the town assembly a 60-page document, which described the grand design of the future Onagawa, and basic principles of reconstruction. The key message was “Stay, return and come to live in Onagawa.” The grand design explained how the town should be rebuilt so that people

who stayed in Onagawa after the disaster would continue to stay, people had who left Onagawa for temporary evacuation would come back, and outsiders would come to live in Onagawa.<sup>ii</sup> Aoyama explained:

Town rebuilding may not be what the chamber of commerce would usually work on, but unless Onagawa residents settle here, work and raise children, there will be no business. FRK has made proposals to the municipal government because we think we won't get a good reconstruction plan if we just leave it to town hall. The government has its own perspectives and priorities. As FRK was the first instance in all affected areas where the private sector took initiative in reconstruction, the municipal government cannot ignore us. I believe that the current plan for town rebuilding proposed by the municipal government is almost like what we originally envisioned.

FRK also worked with the town assembly and had discussions with all the assembly members. FRK believed that, given that FRK provided a non-partisan space to discuss issues and to understand the context and background of the municipal government's proposals, the assembly members appreciated FRK. On the other hand, Ryoichi Sato (age 68), a veteran assembly member and chairman of the assembly committee, expressed some concerns over FRK:

Before the disaster, the town assembly members often had heated discussions over Onagawa's plans and governance. However, after the disaster, the assembly members may have been cut out of the loop. The private sector people were quick to respond, while it took some time till the municipal government and the assembly started to take actions. Therefore, proposals made by younger people like (Abe) Yoshihide have been accepted without much review. I wish we the assembly could have developed our own proposal. I have no objection to respecting the proposals made by young people, but I think it is a problem that the assembly does not play an active role to check and monitor, and many assembly members find it frustrating.

Onagawa may have been quick in clearing debris and rubble but has been slow in terms of building restoration housing.<sup>4</sup> If we have to wait another three or four years till restoration housing is built, the number of people living in Onagawa would greatly decline. We, the elderly, would feel increasingly depressed living in temporary housing. It is surely a good thing to place our hope in the younger generation. But at the same time, for the elderly, our priority should be to secure a place where they can move out from the temporary housing and get settled as soon as possible.

## **Important Roles Played by "Outsiders"**

While Onagawa's restoration was mainly driven by local initiatives, people coming from outside, "outsiders," also played important roles.

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<sup>4</sup> Restoration housing refers to permanent homes for people who lost their houses in the disaster and have lived in temporary housing since then.

## **El Faro: Trailer-House Inn**

When the disaster happened, Yosuke Komatsu (age 31), originally from Miyagi prefecture, was working at Recruit, a leading advertisement, publishing and human resource company. Believing that his life's mission was to make a difference in the affected areas, he quit Recruit in September 2011 despite his high performance at the company and visited the tsunami-stricken coastal towns and cities in Miyagi prefecture one after another for three months. He always carried his name cards, with the self-designed title of "Behind-the-scenes Supporter for the Restoration and Revitalization of the Affected Coastal Areas of Miyagi", and a business plan for a trailer house hotel. While most of the towns and cities did not take him seriously and turned him away, he was treated totally differently at Onagawa where he first visited in the mid October 2011. Aoyama met Komatsu and told him immediately, "There will be a meeting where innkeepers who lost their property will gather and discuss what to do. Can you join the meeting?" Komatsu was also impressed with the fact that Onagawa already had a vision for town rebuilding which had been developed by local people. Komatsu then started to work as a staff member of the FRK strategic planning team.

Onagawa had a problem with accommodation: the facilities which had not been affected by the tsunami were already swamped with construction workers, and there was no space for volunteers or relatives visiting the town. However, as the town was planning to put in mounds to elevate the land, for the coming few years, new buildings including hotels could not be built. Without additional accommodations, the town would fail to capture the flow of people coming into Onagawa, who might return as tourists once the town was rebuilt.

Komatsu had an idea; if an inn was built using trailer houses instead of permanent buildings, they could be regarded as cars in a parking lot. Four local innkeepers whose inns had been wiped away showed interest in Komatsu's idea to build an inn collaboratively using trailer houses. Using his professional network, Komatsu engaged a designer and an architect in Tokyo who helped him design and construct a stylish trailer house, helped the innkeepers develop a business plan to get financing, and supported their negotiation with the government. In late December 2012, the trailer house inn El Faro opened for business.

Komatsu defined that, as "an outsider," his role would be to help local Onagawa people achieve what they wanted to achieve by bringing external resources to bear and coordinating local people as a neutral third-party. He explained the challenges he had faced in the El Faro project:

There was surely a big gap between the speed and results which I wanted to see and what local people wanted. They often said, "This is moving too fast." I thought we should make the best thing in the affected areas, while local people were pretty much satisfied if they could rebuild an inn. It was a big challenge to keep them motivated and let them run with fire in their heart.

A community is not like a company where people can work together towards one vision or share certain values. Under this big company Onagawa, there are business operators, the municipal government and the assembly. As an outsider, in order to engage local people and carry a project forward, I have to have a pragmatic understanding of how the town works, and I always need to be aware of who to get buy-in from

first, and what not to do.

Komatsu continued to work not only on the El Faro business but also on creating a tourism business plan and launching a Spanish tile studio business. Aoyama, who was Komatsu's first Onagawa contact, recalled:

After the disaster, there were many people coming to Onagawa. We did not know whom we could trust. Komatsu-san came to us out of nowhere and said he would like to support people in the affected areas. All he had was his strange name card. He looked sincere and was very humble, but I could not be sure if he was trustworthy. But I decided to listen to him talk and asked questions – then I thought he might be something special. Now, he is simply outstanding. He has grown a lot.

### **Community currency: Atom**

Prior to the disaster, Onagawa's chamber of commerce had studied about community currency as a way to increase economic circulation within the town. After the disaster, they started to consider introducing "Atom<sup>5</sup> currency"; if people got involved in social activities, they would receive Atom currency, which could be used at affiliated stores.<sup>6</sup> The chamber of commerce would issue Atom currency (1 Yen is 1 Horsepower) and if people got involved in "help-each-other" activities which would contribute to Onagawa such as volunteer activities, they would get Atom currency in compensation for their contribution. The Atom currency could be then used at affiliated stores, such as stores in the temporary shopping mall. The system would therefore promote consumption within the community as well as social activities. A group called "Tsunagappe ("Let's get connected" in the local dialect)" came to support this initiative. Tsunagappe was launched by Shinsuke Muto, a medical doctor and founder of You Home Clinic. The clinic for home care was based in Tokyo, but after the disaster, it opened a branch in Ishinomaki.

Kohei Shiozawa (age 26) was working at NTT Data before the disaster, but quit the company to join You Home Clinic, deeply impressed by Muto's activities in Ishinoaki. As a local staff member of "Tsunagappe," Shiozawa planned and organized various "help-each-other" activities in collaboration with non-profit organizations, volunteers, a medical facility and care center in Onagawa, and worked on increasing the number of affiliated stores. As a result, in the last half of fiscal year 2012, 770,000 Horsepower was issued by the Onagawa Atom currency association, more than the amount issued by headquarters (600,000 Horsepower), and half of the issued currency was actually used. In FY 2013, the Atom currency was issued and used even faster than in FY 2012. Abe talked about the Atom currency:

We knew that shops and restaurants had to change their mindset that customers would come if they just waited. We hope that with the Atom currency they will start thinking creatively about how to attract customers. That is the first step. In addition, the Atom currency is money through which we express our gratitude. There is still so much to be done but we hope that we can provide this money to those coming from outside to help us, to say "Thank you".

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<sup>5</sup> Atom is the name of the hero in "Astroboy," a classic (and hugely popular) Japanese animation written by Osamu Tezuka. Atom's power is measured by horsepower.

<sup>6</sup> The headquarters of Atom currency is Waseda University in Tokyo. Onagawa is its regional branch.

### **Collaboration School: Onagawa Kogakukan**

Katariba was a non-profit organization established in 2001 to provide career guidance programs to high school students. In July 2011, Katariba established "Onagawa Kogakukan" to offer educational opportunities to students who had lost places to study due to the disaster. The school's mission was defined as "turning the grief of the disaster experience into strength", and volunteers from local private tutoring schools and college students offered tutoring, educational guidance and mental care to elementary and middle school students after classes, at an abolished elementary school.

The executive director of Onagawa Kogakukan said, "Our proposal to provide after-school education was turned away at many of the affected communities, but at Onagawa, the chairman of the Onagawa Board of Education was quick to express his interest and support. That is why we were able to launch Onagawa Kogakukan."<sup>7</sup> The result was outstanding; not only did the average time spent studying increase by 2.7 times compared to the period after the disaster when students lacked for places to study, it was also 1.6 times more than the pre-disaster period.<sup>iii</sup> Many students successfully passed their entrance exams, and went on to their first-choice schools.

### **The Future of Onagawa**

In April 2013, Onagawa was rushing to develop the central shopping district in time for the reopening of Onagawa station in 2015. The Onagawa municipal government was developing the design of the station and the shopping area, with support from notable figures such as the architect Shigarū Ban, and Yasushi Akimoto, producer of the hugely popular idol group AKB48. However, FRK members were concerned that if planning was left entirely in the hands of these external experts, it might become "something too sophisticated without unique Onagawa-ness." They were also concerned that if the municipal government took on a central role, the principle of equality would be imposed and selection criteria for shopping district tenants would be virtually non-existent. As a result, downtown Onagawa might become a lackluster destination with few visitors. Aoyama was aware of the need to present FRK's own town-rebuilding plan and vision for the future to the local government and external experts, as well as the challenges that would entail.

We have to draw a line between those we can invite to the new shopping district and those we cannot. If we want to attract people from outside Onagawa, the tenants should be attractive to tourists, financially sustainable and have successors. We cannot be all things to all people. But the government's responsibility is to serve everyone equally, and that is why they cannot draw such a line.

And so they have asked the Onagawa chamber of commerce, the largest group of business operators in this town, to take on this role. This is a task none would like to do or were trained for. But I think it is our

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<sup>7</sup> Otsuchi-cho in Iwate prefecture heard about Katariba's activities in Onagawa and they approached Katariba, asking them to open a similar after-school program in Otsuchi-cho. In Dec. 2011, "Otsuchi-cho Ringakusha" was established.

destiny. I lost my life once, almost, when the tsunami came. I have been working tirelessly since then – I have taken only seven days off<sup>8</sup> in the past two years – almost like I no longer have any earthly attachments. But even with all this hard work, I am still anxious as to whether we are doing right by all those who have put their faith in us.

On the other hand, while supporting the younger generation's initiatives, Sato was becoming increasingly worried that the town's reconstruction was proceeding without sufficient concern for the needs and feelings of the elderly. He was also worried that the current plan did not take into consideration the fact that a town was like a living eco-system.

Even if we set up a nice commercial area, if people are going to live in a separate residential district on a hill, they would rather go to the giant AEON<sup>9</sup> mall near Ishionomaki city by car. How much difference will a beautifully-designed shopping area in front of the station make unless it's part of the natural flow of people in the town? Not much. Basically, shops should coexist with residences. If we just keep pushing forward with the current plan, Onagawa may become like Okushiri after the earthquake.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Okushiri, they gathered shops in front of the station and created a modern shopping district. But it failed once convenience stores started to come in.

For the elderly, praying at Shirakawa shrine is our biggest relief. The shrine gives us comfort and peace. When we think about town rebuilding, we have to think about things like where to locate the shrine. A town will gradually fall apart if even one little component is missing. It would collapse if tradition and culture are disregarded and thrown out. Various elements mix and combine to create one town.

In most of the affected communities, people were still struggling to agree on the future vision for their communities, and reconstruction was slow. Therefore, when people involved in restoring other tsunami-affected communities came to Onagawa, they were all astonished by the speed of rebuilding, strong local leadership and the important roles played by outsiders.

But what would "reconstruction" actually mean for Onagawa, a town with a rapidly declining and aging population? How could the town become a place where people would stay, return and come to live? What would young local leaders like Abe and Aoyama have to do in order to keep Onagawa from becoming another example of failed post-disaster reconstruction? And how could they respond to the concerns expressed by older residents such as Sato?

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<sup>8</sup> Weekends included in these seven days.

<sup>9</sup> A leading general merchandizing store (GMS).

<sup>10</sup> Okushiri Island in Hokkaido was hit by a Magnitude 7.8 earthquake in 1993.

Exhibit 1

Map of Onagawa



Exhibit 2          Onagawa before/after the tsunami

Before



After



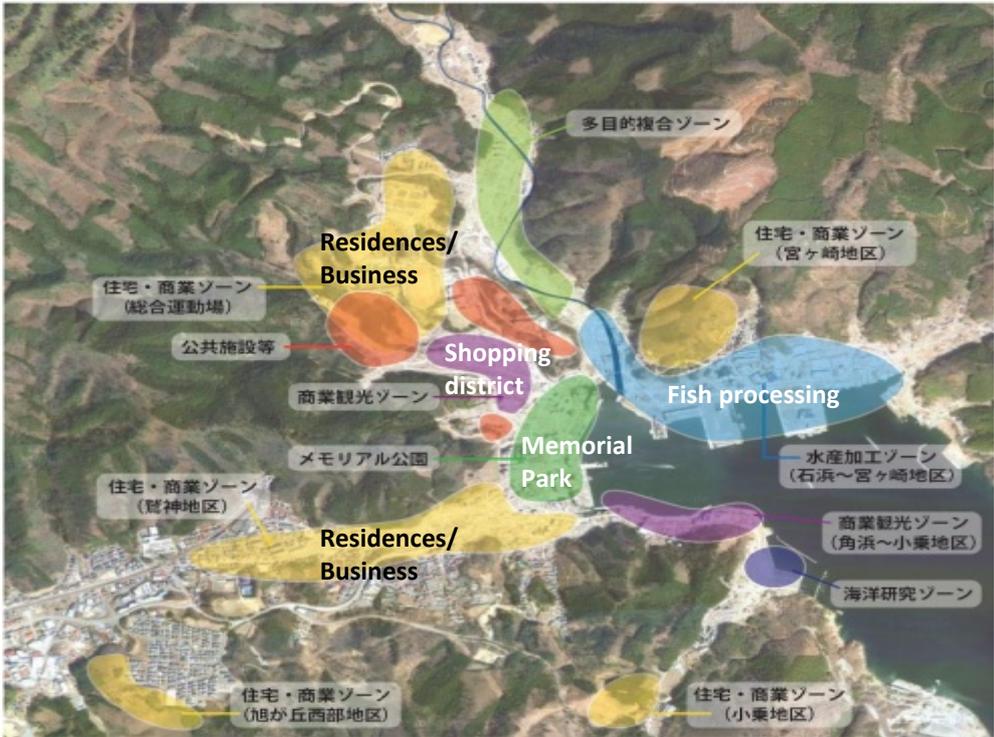
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Exhibit 3 Tsunami-Affected Communities in Miyagi and Iwate

Municipality	Prefecture	# Death (A)	# Missing (B)	Population (2010) (C)	(A+B) / C
Onagawa	Miyagi	602	268	10051	8.7%
Otsuchi	Iwate	803	437	15277	8.1%
Rikuzen Takata	Iwate	1556	217	23302	7.6%
Minami Sanriku	Miyagi	614	223	17431	4.8%
Yamamoto	Miyagi	698	18	16711	4.3%
Yamada	Iwate	604	149	18625	4.0%
Kamaishi	Iwate	888	152	39578	2.6%
Ishionmaki	Miyagi	3498	448	160704	2.5%
Higashi Matsushima	Miyagi	1124	28	42908	2.7%
Kesennuma	Miyagi	1209	233	73494	2.0%
Natori	Miyagi	948	41	73140	1.4%
Ohunafo	Iwate	340	80	40738	1.0%

Source: Damage situations by municipality. Available at: <http://www.isobesatoshi.com/data/sisya-eastjapan.html>.

Exhibit 4 Onagawa Reconstruction Plan



Source: Onagawa town hall. Available at: [http://www.town.onagawa.miyagi.jp/hukkou/pdf/iinkai/05\\_meeting/20111004.1-2.gaiyou.pdf](http://www.town.onagawa.miyagi.jp/hukkou/pdf/iinkai/05_meeting/20111004.1-2.gaiyou.pdf).

Exhibit 5 El Faro and its four innkeepers



Source: Yosuke Komatsu.

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<sup>i</sup> Onagawa's Statistics FY 2012, p.10. Onagawa's plan on welfare for the elderly – business plan of nursing care, March 2013. P.10.

<sup>ii</sup> Interview with Takahiro Aoyama, Report on Reconstruction of the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tohoku Electrics, Feb. 29 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Katariba website.