

Taikichiro Mori Memorial Research Grants 2021

Research Achievement Report

Project Title: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Engagement Strategies for Disaster Preparedness in Japan

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Report on fieldwork across different local governments and other stakeholders on
effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Public Engagement Approaches in Japan by
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Introduction

As part of the fulfillment of the Taikichiro Mori Memorial Research Grants from Keio University – SFC, recipients are requested to submit a Research Achievement Report, hence, this report summarizes the activities of the fieldwork conducted as part of my thesis reconnaissance survey in some municipalities in Japan regarding other areas in terms of public engagements strategies for disaster preparedness and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic. These surveys were conducted by first conducting a literature review to understand the framework at which some stakeholders adopt in conducting disaster preparedness acuties, especially for foreign residents. These were listed as pre-pandemic era activities. The fieldwork was then conducted to check which activities have changed because of the pandemic and how to overcome some challenges.

This was conducted against the backdrop that, foreign residents in Japan are classified as a vulnerable group at risk of disasters in the country. Therefore, various measures are in place to engage, educate and offer first-hand experience to some disaster countermeasures required to overcome systematic disaster preparedness problems. However, the prevention of infection and spread of COVID-19 has necessitated the need to keep social distancing and refrain from certain public encounters deem non-essential. This study, therefore, looked at how these arrangements coincided with public engagement strategies of empowerment, collaboration, involvement, consultation, and education for disaster preparedness, especially to foreign residents in Japan.

Pre-COVID 19 Pandemic Era Engagement

The study reveals that, before the pandemic, most disaster preparedness activities were mainly conducted through in-person engagement such as disaster drill exercises, seminars of disaster prevention actions, Japanese language classes (Yasashiee Nihongo), and others. These were not only conducted for foreigners but all residents in the various local government areas. The case of foreign residents was peculiar because most stakeholders

involved in these activities are volunteers either working under NPOs, NGOs, or International Associations. Furthermore, additional assistance to foreign residents were conducted via telephone calls, emails, and the dissemination of relevant information through brochures and pamphlets. These, according to studies on public engagements, are classified under contact engagement or largely in-person engagements. To itemize these activities, a matrix was created to include all the activities.

COVID-19 Pandemic Era Engagements

The designed matrix asked some international associations and other actors to mark which activities have changed between the 2020/21 fiscal year attributed to the pandemic as part of preventing infections. The analysis from this revealed that, at this period, most in-person activities were halted. Some events were completely cancelled or scaled-down in numbers to prevent COVID-19 infections.

Impact of the Pandemic on Public Engagement Strategies

The conclusion derived from the fieldwork indicates that the most impacted activities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic are the Yasashiee Nihongo classes which are designed to introduce foreign residents to many phrases necessary in daily living in Japan and during disasters. Furthermore, most events, seminars, and other in-person engagements were moved online. This brought both merits and demerits. The plan to adopt online-based engagement activities in one end broaden the number of people who could participate, because once the person registers to attend, he/she can join the online meeting wherever he/she is; as opposed to where they had to be present at the premises of the organizers. The challenge to this approach was the fact that, it brought extra inconveniences and challenges to volunteers involved in conducting such activities. These were particularly experienced by volunteers who did not have much knowledge on the use of many online platforms.

Conclusion

Overall, the analysis and results have been submitted and accepted in a peer-review journal, awaiting final publication.