

Beyond Seawalls: Rethinking Vulnerability and Recovery in Post-Disaster Japan

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“Upon checking their house’s droppings site, only Mr. Sparrow’s family pooped more than the permitted threshold. However, the village decides not to prohibit them from defecating because they seem to try really hard to eat less. The whole family of Mr. and Mrs. Sparrows is now emaciated, with only skin and bones being seen. Even their feathers molt seriously.

Mr. Sparrow’s family then flies to the middle and shows the village their severe malnutrition to prove they have tried their best to eat the least possible. All the birds show their sympathy and agree not to punish.”

In “GHG Emissions”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]



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In the aftermath of natural disasters, recovery efforts often prioritize rebuilding physical infrastructure. However, a recent study by Setsuko Onoda proposes a more holistic perspective—urging policymakers to consider *regional homeostasis*, a concept referring to the balance and sustainability of both ecological systems and daily life conditions, as the foundation for genuine recovery in disaster-stricken regions of Tohoku, Japan [2].

The study distinguishes between two categories of vulnerability: *verbalized* issues, such as the reconstruction of seawalls [3], and *unverbalized* issues, such as limitations in mobility and gender inequity [4,5]. While verbalized concerns are easily identified and acted upon, unverbalized issues often remain invisible in policy discussions despite their significant impact on community well-being.

In Rikuzentakata, the post-2011 tsunami recovery involved constructing a 12.5-meter seawall—more than double its previous height. Though effective for disaster prevention, the towering structure now obscures the ocean view and disrupts the city’s historical and cultural landscape. By contrast, the nearby town of Otsuchi chose to rebuild its seawall at the original height of 6.4 meters, preserving residents’ visual and cultural connection to the sea [2].

While these physical infrastructures represent tangible progress, the study emphasizes that structural inequities—such as declining public transportation and the exclusion of women from decision-making—continue to undermine recovery. In Iwate and Akita prefectures, depopulation, limited job opportunities, and gender-based disparities remain unresolved, reinforcing long-standing vulnerabilities. These issues are deeply embedded in institutional norms and have been exacerbated by the rigid policies guiding reconstruction efforts.

Onoda calls for a recovery model that not only addresses material rebuilding but also recognizes and verbalizes previously unspoken vulnerabilities. This requires fostering inclusive governance, dismantling institutional discrimination, and enhancing community participation in decision-making processes.

Ultimately, the study argues that true resilience emerges not from infrastructure alone but from restoring the balance between human systems and their surrounding environments [6,7]. Achieving regional homeostasis is thus both a political and ecological imperative—one that recognizes that the health of communities depends on the integrity of both their social fabric and natural landscapes.

References

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