

Waiting as Support, Listening as Aid: A Case Study of Student Disaster Volunteering after the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake

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(Received December 1, 2008 accepted June 14, 2009)

ABSTRACT

Disaster volunteering as a participatory approach to disaster mitigation was investigated by examining a case study of student disaster volunteering following the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake on October 23, 2004, which caused serious damage in Niigata Prefecture in Japan. Immediately after the quake, we started promoting disaster volunteering based on mid- and long-term perspectives. A student group worked as disaster volunteers in collaboration with a consortium of other disaster nonprofit organizations. Through the student activities, the group established a moderately familiar relationship—neither too close nor too distant—with the residents of temporary housing. In this article, the significance of the students' volunteer activities was examined based on a philosophical discussion about waiting and listening. Furthermore, the importance of liberation from the rigid relationship of aid provider and aid receiver is discussed.

Keyword: disaster volunteering, waiting and listening, the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake

1. Introduction

In this article, we investigate disaster volunteering as a participatory approach to disaster mitigation by examining a case study of student disaster volunteering after the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake (also known as the Chuetsu Earthquake) on October 23, 2004, which caused serious damage in Niigata Prefecture in Japan. According to a report published by the Niigata Prefectural Government on September 24, 2008,¹ the earthquake left 68 casualties, 4,795 injured, and 121,495 residential buildings damaged.

Many people within and outside the prefecture joined the volunteering efforts upon witnessing the severe damage caused by the earthquake. According to

another report published by the prefectural government, approximately 95,000 people in terms of man-days joined the volunteering efforts after the quake.² To date, this is the largest number of volunteers to assist in an earthquake relief effort since the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (also known as the Kobe Earthquake).

With some exceptions, most Japanese disaster volunteers³ are untrained and nonprofessional. Disaster volunteering is primarily a participatory disaster relief effort made by ordinary citizens. People who join such an effort will learn about many issues concerning disasters such as what constitutes a disaster, what should be done in the midst of a disaster, and what should be done before an impending disaster occurs. These people will then apply what they have

learned from their experiences in their local communities. Therefore, we also recognize disaster volunteering to be a part of disaster mitigation.

Disaster volunteering was still not very popular in Japanese society at the end of the 20th century even though Japan is a country prone to disasters, particularly earthquakes. Volunteering gained popularity in Japanese society through the activities of the people who volunteered after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, which killed more than 6,400 people in and around Kobe in 1995. One report claims that over 1 million people joined the disaster relief efforts in terms of man-days.

As mentioned, there have been many disasters including earthquakes in Japan; however, ordinary citizens rarely volunteered to join relief efforts before the Kobe Earthquake. While it is true that people in kinship, neighborhood, and professional communities have mutually come forward to provide aid in the event of a natural disaster, Japanese people do not recognize these activities as volunteering.⁴ The appearance of such a large number of volunteers, most of whom were untrained for disaster relief, was unprecedented in Japan's history.⁵

The impact made by the disaster volunteers after the Kobe Earthquake was so strong that volunteering became a regular occurrence in Japan thereafter. What was a rare, praiseworthy activity prior to the Kobe quake became popular in Japanese society along with the word "borantia," a phoneticized version of the English word "volunteer." Many disaster nonprofit organizations were also established, from which two nationwide networks of disaster nonprofit organizations emerged (e.g., Atsumi and Suzuki, 2003; Suzuki, 2006).

Studies on Japanese disaster volunteers were also conducted immediately after the Kobe Earthquake. Some research on volunteers working to support evacuees in shelters has been conducted (e.g., Sugiman, Atsumi, Nagata, and Watanabe, 1995; Yamori, 1997; Shimizu, Mizuta, Akiyama, Ura, Takemura, Nishikawa, Matsui, and Miyato, 1997). All these studies are written in Japanese; however, there are also a few articles written in English. Hashimoto (2000) points out the relationship between the local government and disaster volunteers in his descriptions of local government activities following the Kobe Earthquake.

However, most of these articles describe the

volunteers in the rescue and relief activity phases. It is true that Shaw and Goda (2004) describe the case of disaster volunteering after the Kobe Earthquake from a long-term perspective, but their main focus is to illustrate social change in the disaster area from the viewpoint of creating a sustainable civil society. Volunteering after the rescue and relief activity phases has not been sufficiently discussed.

Suzuki (2006), who has published one of the latest works on disaster volunteering in Japan, conducted interviews in the affected areas of the Niigata Heavy Rains of 2004 and the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake alongside a questionnaire survey in other regions. On the basis of his research, he points out five noteworthy points for future disaster volunteering: (1) the need for rear-echelon support, (2) the need for long-term support, (3) the importance of the role of volunteers of nonprofit organizations in reconnecting the affected area with the rest of the world, (4) the need for regional cooperation, and (5) the need for cooperation under normal conditions.

In this article, we focus on the post-rescue and post-relief activities conducted as a part of long-term support for disaster victims, which Suzuki (2006) points out to be an important aspect of disaster volunteering. In addition, many students have participated in recent disaster volunteering activities in Japan. According to Suzuki, Suga, and Atsumi (2003), some reports claim that 40–60% of all volunteers in the Kobe Earthquake relief effort were students. Therefore, we also focus on the student disaster volunteering that occurred after the rescue and relief activity phases.

Furthermore, we examine the activities of fromHUS,⁶ the student group that also has faculty members from Osaka University in Japan. The group mainly conducted its activities in the post-rescue and post-relief phases of the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake. The group's activities have been described by Suwa, Atsumi, and Seki (2006) and Suwa and Atsumi (2006), but these papers are written in Japanese. In this article, we summarize the same case in English from different theoretical perspectives.

Before commencing our analysis, let us briefly review the former two articles about fromHUS written in Japanese. The article by Suwa and Atsumi (2006) is a record of the group's activities, which were promoted by the faculty members and students at Osaka University. Immediately since the quake, the authors

have been promoting volunteering during times of disaster based on mid- and long-term perspectives. They point out that the activities of fromHUS were characterized by four features. First, the members offered continuous support for residents of provisional housing rather than emergency relief for evacuees in shelters. Second, the members traveled to the disaster area from distances of over 400 km. Third, most of the activities were conducted with the support of the Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster⁷ (NVNAD), a nonprofit organization. Fourth, the members had almost exclusive access to the offices of a consortium of nonprofit organizations, including the NVNAD, to use as their home office.

On the other hand, Suwa, Atsumi, and Seki (2006) in their report focus on the relationship between nonprofit organizations and individual student volunteers. They analyze two types of volunteer interests of students in the context of disaster volunteer activity. Their discussion is based on an article about a recent trend in attitude of Japanese university students (Yamaguchi, Masuda, Seki, and Atsumi, 2003.) They also focus on the students' learning through disaster volunteering.

Based on this research on fromHUS, we examine what is important in forging relationships between volunteers and survivors to promote a participatory approach in post-rescue and post-relief activities. The importance of volunteering itself will also be illustrated through this case study.

2. Case Study

2.1 Background and Outline

On October 23, 2004, the Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake caused severe damage in the northern part of Japan. Over 100,000 people were evacuated from their homes to shelters such as gymnasiums. Official agencies such as the police, the fire department, and the Japan Self-Defense Forces worked for the rescue and relief activities and supported the evacuees.

The construction of temporary housing commenced a few days after the quake, and evacuees who were unable to immediately return to their homes were moved there about one month later. Surviving the winter in particular was a critical issue because the Mid-Niigata prefectural area is known for having some of the heaviest snowfalls in the world.

Nonprofit organizations also played an active role in the relief activity. Some of the organizations started activities in the form of cooperation with nationwide networks of disaster nonprofit organizations, and many volunteer centers were launched in the disaster area with the support of disaster nonprofit organizations. Additionally, some of these nonprofit organizations promoted their activities based on mid- and long-term perspectives. This was because many people were unable to return to their homes immediately after the disaster, and psychosocial problems such as rehabilitation and revitalization of communities were important issues that had to be dealt with.

A few weeks after the quake, the NVNAD and another nonprofit organization formed a consortium for the disaster relief known as the "Support Group from KOBE."⁸ The group rented a room in an office building (Photos 1 and 2) and opened an operating



Photo 1: Front view of the base of the Support Group from KOBE (Date taken: February 22, 2005)



Photo 2: Exterior of the building in which the Support Group from KOBE was located (Date taken: May 6, 2006; Photographer: Koichi Suwa)

base near an area of temporary housing complexes⁹ in the disaster zone. The operating base was not located at the same site as the housing complexes because the members of the support group wanted the residents to be able to refresh themselves through the different atmosphere at the base from that at the complexes. The base was also within walking distance of Nagaoka Station.¹⁰ Figure 1 shows the location of the temporary housing complexes and the operating base.¹¹

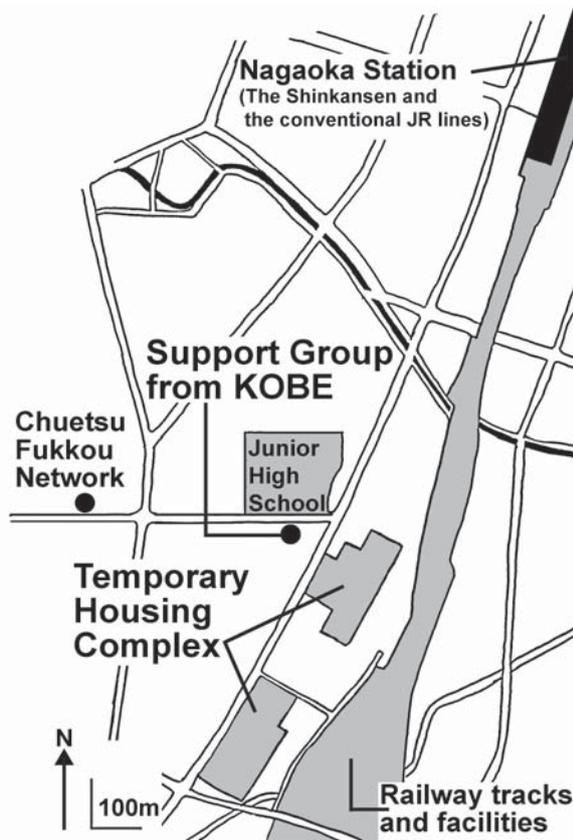


Figure 1: Map of the area around the base of the Support Group from KOBE in April 2005

Photo 3 shows the side view of the southern part of the area shown in Figure 1.

Immediately following the quake, the authors not only promoted but also themselves became involved in volunteering during times of disaster, based on mid- and long-term perspectives. The first author launched and managed the fromHUS mailing list (this will be discussed in greater detail below) and group. This author also supported the off-line activities of fromHUS. The second author has visited the disaster area frequently since the quake, sometimes with members of fromHUS. The third author has supported all the members described above, within or outside the affected area.

2.2 Activities of the Support Group from KOBE and fromHUS

The NVNAD, located in Kobe near Osaka, promoted its disaster relief activities immediately after the earthquake. The second author, a board member of the NVNAD, visited the affected area on October 24 with the organization's director.¹²

Approximately a week after the quake, this author called upon the students of Osaka University to join the volunteer efforts. Some students responded to his appeal and volunteered in Nagaoka City, which was part of the affected area, with an ex-staff member of the NVNAD in early November.

On November 29, the authors and the students who had visited the affected area held a briefing session for the other students. It was at the end of this meeting that the first author called on the participants at the session to launch the mailing list named "fromHUS," whose members included faculty and



Photo 3: Side view of the southern part of the area shown in Figure 1 (Date taken: May 6, 2006; Shooting angle: south to north; Photographer: Koichi Suwa) The temporary houses are located in the circled areas.

students of Osaka University. As mentioned above, the group, which consisted of the members on the mailing list, was also known as fromHUS afterward.

The members of fromHUS visited the affected area in mid-December and went to a volunteer center in Nagaoka. Although the Mid-Niigata prefectural area was far from Osaka, the members traveled to the disaster area from over 400 km away via night trains with financial support from the NVNAD. At that time, the main activities of the volunteers in Nagaoka were supporting the survivors by moving their household goods from shelters to temporary houses. However, there were too many volunteers for the work to be done and the students were therefore unable to work effectively.

During that visit, the fromHUS volunteers also joined the activities of the Support Group from KOBE. At that time, the support group and its base were not popular among the residents of the temporary housing complexes. Therefore, the main activity of the members was the arrangement and distribution of relief goods and the editing and distribution of fliers for the residents.

In the last few weeks of December 2004, they organized space in the operating base for the residents, especially for the elderly and those living alone. The aim was to provide comfort and relief and to alleviate the residents' tension and anxiety. They opened a coffee corner in the operating base of the Support Group from KOBE where they not only provided coffee but also engaged in various activities to manage the space



Photo 4: Interior view of the base of the Support Group from KOBE (Date taken: February 23, 2005; Photographer: Yoshihiro Seki)

The coffee corner was located on the right side of this photo frame.

better, such as making signboards, arranging furniture, and redecorating the rooms (Photo 4).

The management of the coffee corner was promoted not only as a means of providing refreshments but also as a means of producing an alternative environment and atmosphere for the residents in the temporary housing complex. In fact, conversations with visitors from the housing complex over cups of coffee became one of the most important roles of the members, although it initially appeared to be no more than a way to kill time.

After the 2005 New Year holidays, fromHUS held its first briefing session on January 13 at Osaka University. Twenty-one people including nonmembers attended and discussed the next stage of the group's activities. Around January 17, 2005, the 10th anniversary of the Kobe Earthquake, the base was temporarily closed for ten days because the Support Group from KOBE including the NVNAD had to attend memorial events and activities in and around Kobe. The activities of fromHUS were also suspended.

By February, the base had become popular with the residents of the temporary housing complex as a space where they could relax and feel at ease. Many residents visited the coffee corner, and the students reported a good atmosphere. There were also good relationships forged between the volunteers and the residents, and some volunteers were even invited for meals by the residents. Some of their activities were reported in the press.¹³

The fromHUS members had their second briefing session on March 8 at Osaka University where they discussed the next stage of their activities. However, they encountered some difficulties because almost half of the students had to leave the volunteer activities because of their need to job-hunt. Furthermore, the base was to be closed at the end of April because the lease contract had ended and there was also a shortage of money. Finally, a nationwide religious group donated money and manpower to the Support Group from KOBE, and the base was maintained for a short period of time mainly by the members of the religious group. On May 20, 2005, the base was closed and the coffee space was moved to the office of the Chuetsu Fukko Network (its location is shown in Figure 1), a nonprofit organization established after the quake.

The Support Group from KOBE and the mem-

bers of fromHUS promoted other activities such as visiting each of the temporary homes with gifts of sweets. They also set up a corner section at the base where residents could help themselves to free clothes and tableware.¹⁴ Furthermore, they invited the residents to Kobe Luminarie, an annual light festival held in Kobe¹⁵ in December 2004. All of the activities were geared towards introducing the residents to the space and having them feel an attachment to it.

Through these activities, the NVNAD provided the students with a solid foundation and showed them the course of activities. The organization funded some the traveling expenses and rent of the operating base of the Support Group from KOBE. The NVNAD also held a briefing session in Kobe and issued a report on the activities of the Support Group from KOBE. The idea to establish a space for a coffee corner was also proposed by the NVNAD.

After the closure of the base, the members of fromHUS joined the briefing session of the Support Group from KOBE on June 5, 2005. Subsequently, the activities of fromHUS were phased out, but the group continued with activities such as foot bathing¹⁶ in the temporary housing complexes and public housing complexes for the people who had lost their homes in the quake.

2.3 The voices of the residents in the temporary housing complexes

We can see the effect of the activities of the Support Group from KOBE and fromHUS based on the reports of some students of fromHUS. While it was optional, the members of fromHUS frequently reported their activities on their mailing list.¹⁷

For instance, conversations over coffee were initiated and human ties, which were open to verbal and nonverbal communication, were forged. One student reported the following:

The effect of coffee is great. I said to the visitors, "Would you like to have some coffee or something?" and more and more people gathered, perhaps because it is simple and easy compared to tea. We had a nice long chat with visitors, including students of the vocational school in front of our base and a staff member of the cleaning company. They also talked to each other about the extent of the damage they had suffered. (A

report to the NVNAD written by a student)

It is important to note here that this type of casual conversation gave the members a glimpse into the actual living conditions and needs of each victim. There were also other reports by the students, such as the following:

A person who just lost the family dog two days ago has come. According to the person, the dog was old, but it was under stress because of the earthquake. ([fromHUS][00396] February 6, 2005)¹⁸

It was heartbreaking to hear that they lost some of their rice bowls and were using the remaining bowls in turns and washing disposable wooden chopsticks and using them again and again.¹⁹ ([fromHUS][00136] December 21, 2004)

There appears to be no damage to the townscape and the children are lively, but we still hear things like "I lost mementos of my mother" that naturally come up in their conversation. ([fromHUS][00422] February 12, 2005)

The survivors would never express such sentiments as read in the reports if they were just asked, "Are you having any difficulties as a result of the earthquake?" This is because victims would not admit their actual needs if questioned in such a blunt manner.

The most significant benefit of the activities was the construction of comfortable places for the survivors. The residents of the temporary homes were able to stay there in comfort, without any tension or apprehension. In addition, the place saw a moderately familiar relationship—neither too close nor too distant—established between the students and the residents. The voices of the survivors could really be heard in this environment.

3. Discussion

Through the active participation of the student members of fromHUS, an inviting space was managed for the residents of a temporary housing complex, where people gathered and engaged in animated

conversation. We were able to recognize the presence of an alternative environment and atmosphere for the residents, based on the students' reports. A space to mingle, like that mentioned above, is an effective tool for understanding the needs of disaster victims.

Generally speaking, understanding the individual needs of each victim is essential because needs diversify and become latent after a rescue and relief effort in a disaster situation. However, this is usually easier said than done. Despite these difficulties, it was relatively smooth in this case due to the flexibility of the students.

We would like to propose that the most important factor in relationships being forged between the volunteers and the residents in this case was the attitude of waiting. It is true that the students arranged the room, prepared coffee, and distributed fliers, but these activities did not directly make the residents visit the room. After all of the preparations had been completed,²⁰ all the students could do was wait.²¹

Waiting is not a state of inaction. Waiting means being ready to respond. In this case, the members of the Support Group from KOBE including the students maintained their base for the residents almost every day for five months. Therefore, waiting is not an activity that is easier than others. At the opposite end of the spectrum of waiting might be the many events that were tenaciously held at the site of the temporary housing complexes. In fact, the members of fromHUS often expressed doubts regarding the value of these events in their mailing list.

We will now focus on a philosophical discussion about waiting and listening by a philosopher, Washida²² (1999; 2006). He points out that people do not feel the need to wait and are unable to wait in current Japanese society. He argues that waiting is important and so is listening, especially in the care of others. He argued that the ultimate style of waiting is waiting without any expectation as in the motif "*En attendant Godot*" (*Waiting for Godot*),²³ a play by Samuel Beckett. Even if there is no expectation, you are still waiting, ready to handle any unexpected situation. In addition, he points out that listening is also a kind of waiting. Listening does not only mean the action of hearing another human's voice; it is being ready to receive any words without any exception.

Waiting and listening are the ultimate expressions of care, and we can see in the case described

above how the students waited and listened very well.²⁴ Of course, the students were prepared for the residents' visits, but it was not these preparations themselves that directly caused the residents as survivors of the earthquake to share what was in their hearts with the students. It was the hospitality shown by the students in their readiness to listen carefully to everything that was said that encouraged the residents to give voice to their feelings and confide in the students.

In this analysis, we have pointed out the importance of waiting in disaster volunteering. Throughout its activities, the base of the Support Group from KOBE was known as "Kyoten" (the base) among the members, but in light of this discussion, we can say that this base was a "waiting room," so to speak. What did the student volunteers wait for in this case? Primarily, it was visits from the residents and hearing their real voices as survivors of the earthquake. However, more symbolically, the residents waited for the students, and more abstractly, it brought about a revitalization of the suffering community. In fact, a student reported that one family waited for the student's visit each time with cream puffs. This shows us that, at the end, it was no longer just the students anticipating the visits of residents but vice versa as well.

Through this kind of reversal, their relationship as disaster volunteers and survivors of the disaster underwent a metamorphosis. In other words, by waiting and listening, both the volunteers and the residents in the disaster area were able to break free of their rigid relationship of aid provider and aid receiver. This is the phase when actual support and aid after a disaster can start.

In terms of participatory approaches in disaster reduction, they have mainly focused on survivors participating in disaster reduction programs. However, most disaster professionals and disaster volunteers are outsiders to the local communities of the disaster area. They might be sometimes unbidden guests for the survivors from mid- and long-term perspectives. We also have to pay attention to the participation of people who plan and implement disaster reduction programs in the local communities of disaster areas. In other words, disaster professionals and volunteers should become welcome guests in disaster-stricken communities. Waiting and listening will be essential for them to become welcome guests after the rescue

and relief activity phases.

Notes

- This paper is based on Suwa, Atsumi, and Seki (2006) and Suwa and Atsumi (2006). A former edition of this article appeared in “ISTR Working Paper Series, Volume V” of the International Society for Third Sector Research.

- After the submission of this paper, all of the authors’ affiliations changed. The current affiliations are as follows. Koichi Suwa and Tomohide Atsumi: Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University; Yoshihiro Seki: School of Sociology, Kansai Gakuin University.

¹ The report entitled “Heisei 16 nen Niigataken Chuetsu Daishinsai niyoru Higaijokyo ni tsuite, Dai 173 hou [Damage caused by the 2004 Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake, 173rd release]” is available on the website of the Niigata Prefectural Government. (http://www.pref.niigata.lg.jp/HTML_Article/173.2.pdf) Accessed on November 24, 2008.

² The report entitled “Niigataken Chuetsu Daishinsai Borantia Ukeire Jokyo [Acceptance of volunteers after the Mid-Niigata Prefecture Earthquake]” is available on the website of the Niigata Prefectural Government. (http://www.pref.niigata.lg.jp/HTML_Simple/200731cyuetsudaishinsaiourasu,0.pdf) Accessed on November 24, 2008.

³ In this article, we focus only on natural disasters as these are completely distinguished from other disasters including man-made emergencies, e.g., plane/railway accidents or mass terrorism, in Japanese society. In the context of Japan, “disaster volunteer” means “volunteer in a natural disaster.”

⁴ These activities have been merely termed “mutual aid in kinship and neighborhood communities” and “mutual aid among professional communities.”

⁵ It is true that there were some exceptions, such as people who worked for the rescue and relief activity in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 (Suzuki, 2004), but they were merely exceptions.

⁶ The group was named after the student affiliation School of Human Sciences and Graduate School of Human Sciences, Osaka University. The pronunciation of the term “fromHUS” is equivalent to that of the underlined part of the phrase “from human sci-

ences.”

⁷ The NVNAD has its roots in the activity of the Nishinomiya Volunteer Network (NVN) immediately after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 and was renamed NVNAD in 1996. The NVNAD is a promoter of J-NET, one of the two nationwide networks of disaster nonprofit organizations in Japan.

⁸ Its Japanese name was “KOBE kara Ouensuru-kai.”

⁹ These temporary housing complexes were built in a vacant lot where a switchyard had once stood and were called “Soshajo-Kita” (Switchyard-North) and “Soshajo-Minami” (Switchyard-South). According to the report published by Nagaoka City, 203 families were staying in Soshajo-Kita and 196 families were staying in Soshajo-Kita as of December 8, 2004. The members of the Support Group from KOBE and fromHUS mainly supported the residents of these two temporary housing complexes although there were also other temporary housing complexes in Nagaoka City.

¹⁰ This railway station was for the Shinkansen as well as the conventional JR lines.

¹¹ Two areas are indicated as temporary housing complexes in Figure 1. The northern one in the figure is Soshajo-Kita and the southern one is Soshajo-Minami.

¹² This author was appointed as the director of the NVNAD in 2007.

¹³ The Osaka edition of the *Mainichi Shimbun*, a national newspaper, reported their activities on February 13, and the *Niigata Nippo*, a local newspaper of Niigata Prefecture, did so on February 18. These articles were about the Support Group from KOBE but the interviewees were members of fromHUS.

¹⁴ Most of the survivors’ tableware had been broken because of the strong shocks of the earthquake.

¹⁵ This activity was motivated by a large anonymous donation by an individual, and the event was given prominent coverage in the press.

¹⁶ In foot-bathing activities, volunteers massage the upper bodies of footbath takers and talk with them. This activity is mainly for the elderly and its main aim is to encourage dialogue in the context of the vitalization of the community after a disaster, especially for elderly people.

¹⁷ On the fromHUS mailing list, 758 mails had been exchanged by the end of December 2005.

- ¹⁸ In the fromHUS mailing list, the subject of each mail was numbered serially. For example, “[fromHUS][00422] February 12, 2005” means that it is the 442nd mail sent on February 12, 2005.
- ¹⁹ In every Japanese family, family members normally each have their own rice bowls and nondisposable wooden chopsticks, so this was very unusual.
- ²⁰ Needless to say, these preparations were part of the necessary conditions for the outcome of the student activities.
- ²¹ It is true that people other than students can be involved in disaster volunteering, but practically speaking, it would have been difficult for working adults to wait for a long time for the survivors’ visits in this case. In addition, the survivors anticipated the conversation and visit of young people in this instance.
- ²² Based on Washida (1999), Atsumi (2001) discussed the meaning of the unconditional co-presence of volunteers in rescue and relief.
- ²³ Godot is a character in the play.
- ²⁴ In the title of this article “Waiting as Support, Listening as Aid,” the terms “support” and “aid” are not clearly differentiated one from another, but we consider that waiting, let alone listening, is also a kind of active approach to dealing with survivors.

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Acknowledgements

We appreciate all of the support for the Support Group from KOBE, NVNAD, and from HUS. This study was partially supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B); No.19730503 for the first author).