

The Meaning of Displacement in Post-Disaster Life

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Background

The Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 caused severe damage to coastal rural communities in northeastern Japan. The disaster generated multiple forms of *forced mobility*. Residents first experienced evacuation, including prolonged stays in temporary housing. Subsequently, many residents were required to relocate permanently as part of government-led reconstruction projects aimed at reducing future disaster risks. In some communities, entire neighborhoods were moved inland or to higher ground.

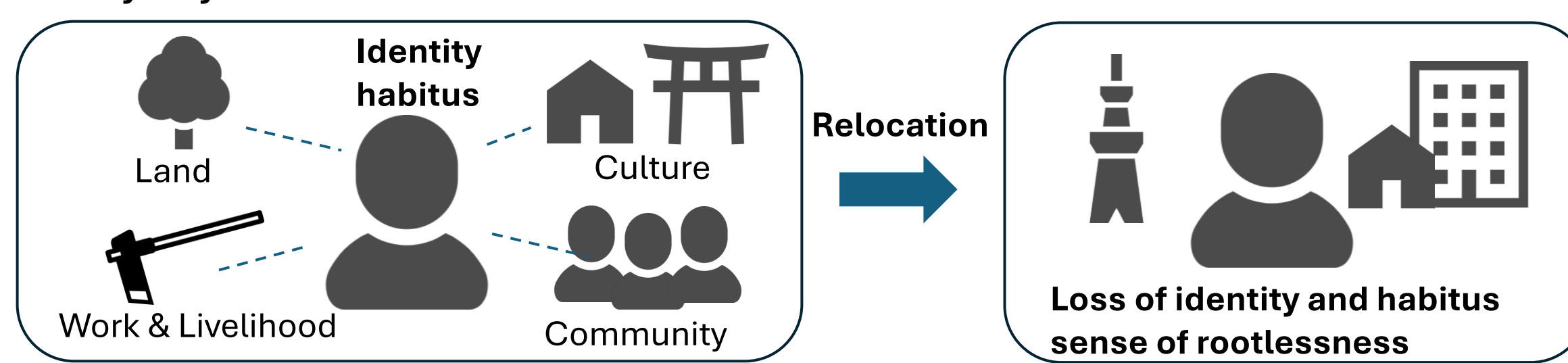
This study examines how such displacement transformed everyday life and livelihoods in rural communities during the recovery process, and explores what forms of care are needed to address the long-term consequences of *uprooting*.



Scenes of the Great East Japan Earthquake in Iwanuma City, Miyagi Prefecture

Key Concepts: Uprooting (*déracinement*)

Uprooting refers to the process by which people are forcibly separated from the places, social relationships, and everyday practices that have shaped their lives. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad (1964=2004), uprooting is not simply physical displacement from a place. It also involves the disruption of social ties, cultural practices, identities, and ways of life that are embedded in a particular locality. In this sense, losing one's home or land can mean losing the social and symbolic foundations that give meaning to everyday life.



Methodology & Study Area

This study adopts a **sociological and ethnographic approach** based on **long-term fieldwork** (2012-2025) in coastal communities of Miyagi Prefecture affected by the tsunami. Through participant **observation and in-depth interviews**, it examines how disaster survivors reconstruct everyday lives, livelihoods, and sources of meaning in the aftermath of displacement and recovery.



REVIEW OF ADMINISTRATIVE DOCUMENTS

Government documents, statistical data, reconstruction plans, etc.



FIELDWORK

Rural coastal areas of Miyagi Prefecture (2012-2025)
Iwanuma-city and Watari-town affected by Tsunami



INTERVIEWS

Approximately 100 local residents, external supporters, volunteers, and NPO representatives, etc.

Findings

Changes in Housing Environment

In Iwanuma City, six coastal communities that suffered tsunami damage were collectively relocated inland. During this process, there was a shift in living conditions from a rural lifestyle to urban housing.



Coastal villages before the earthquake



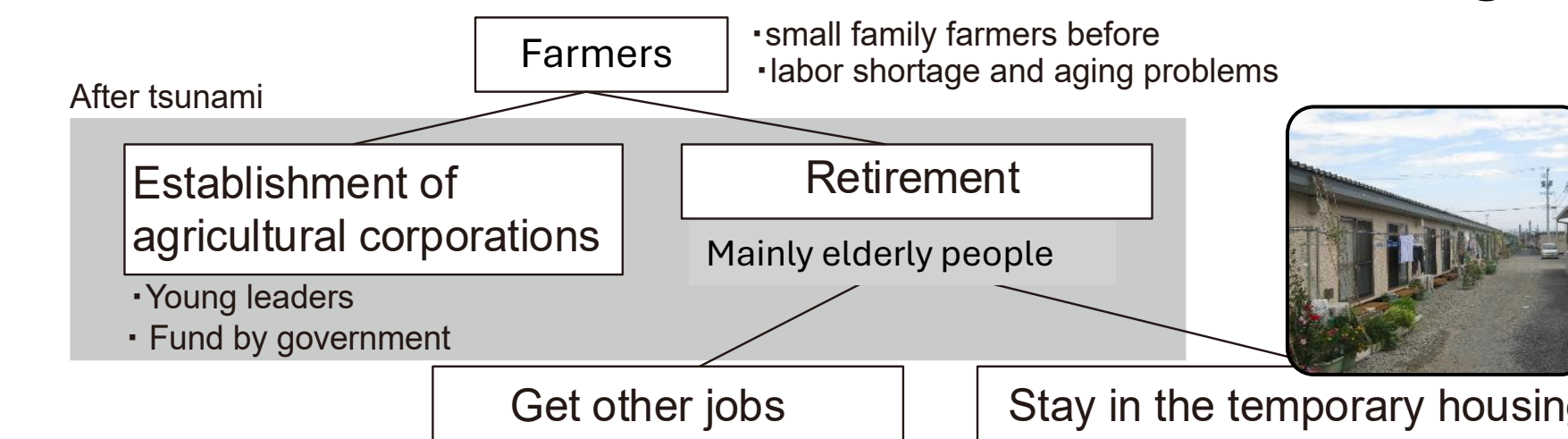
Relocation Plan by Iwanuma City Government



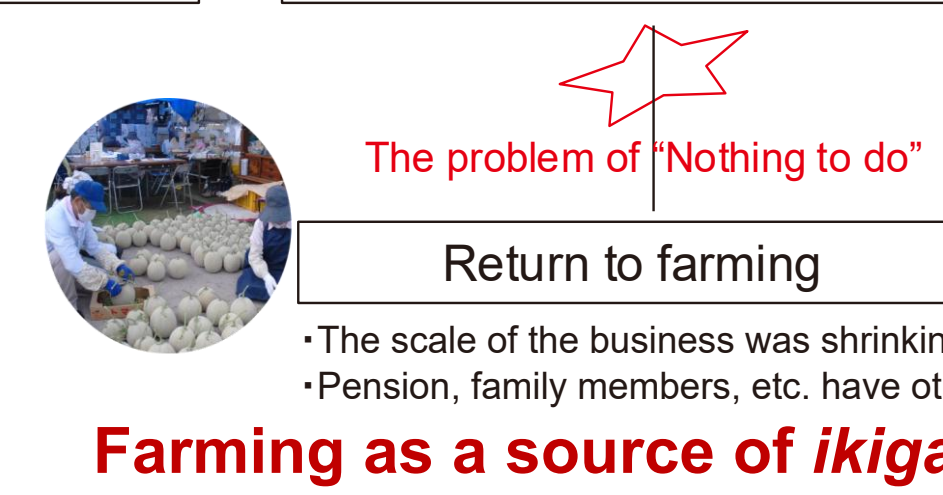
After relocation

Changes in Agricultural structure

Following the tsunami, the Tamaura district of Iwanuma suffered extensive agricultural damage, including the loss of farming equipment and salt contamination of farmland. The government's agricultural recovery policies promoted large-scale farmland consolidation, mechanization, and the establishment of agricultural corporations. Farmers who adopted this model transitioned from family-run operations to corporate-style management and often expressed a strong determination to sustain local agriculture. At the same time, approximately two-thirds of local farmers in Tamaura left agriculture after the disaster. Many were older farmers who did not return to farming after the disaster. For those without successors, rebuilding farm management was difficult, while pension income made retirement a viable option. As a result, the disaster accelerated the withdrawal of many elderly farmers from agriculture. However, among those who retired, there are some who have resumed farming.



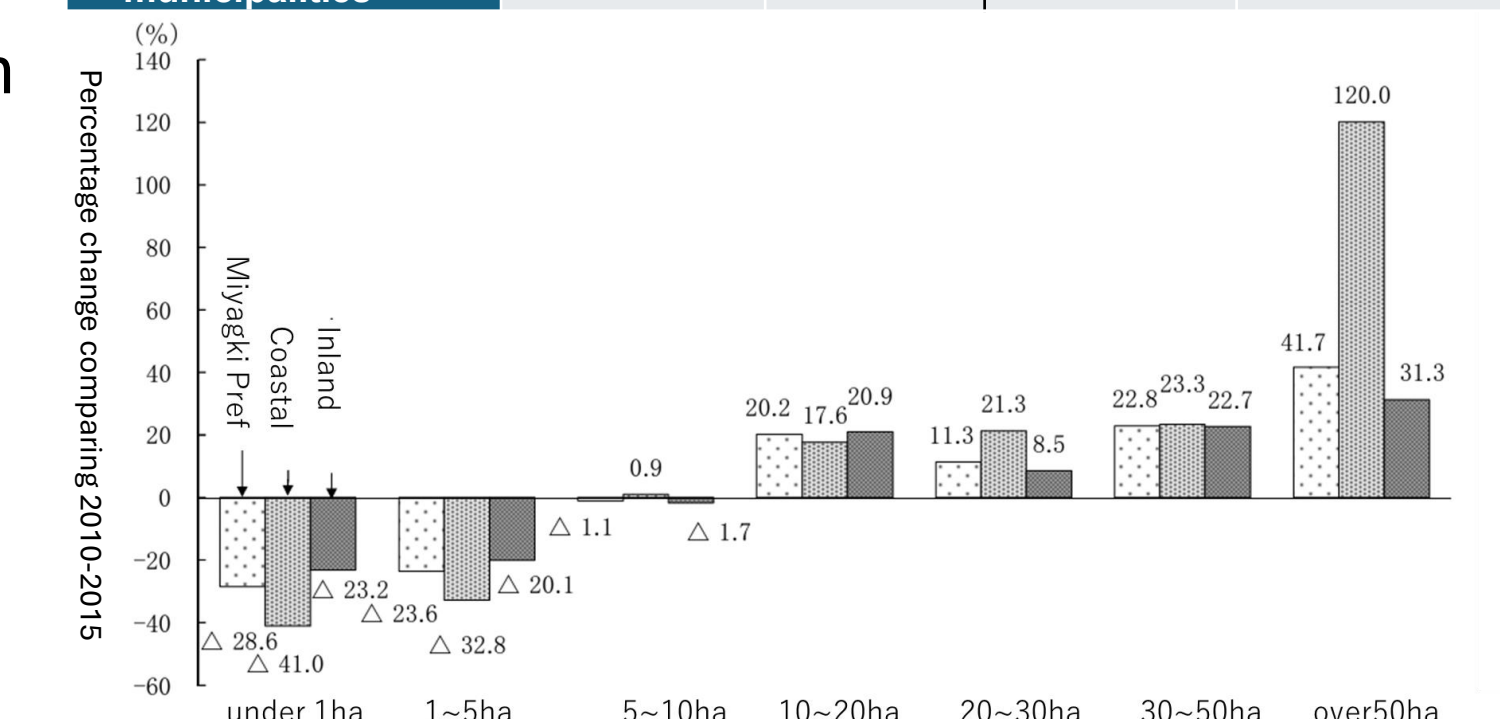
A large-scale plot of farmland after the earthquake



Farming as a source of *ikigai*

Number of farms in Miyagi
Source: Census of Agriculture and Forestry of Japan (2010 and 2015)

Category	2010 (before tsunami) (Unit: management farm)			
	agricultural management farm	Corpo rate management	Family Farm	Organized farm
Total of Miyagi prefecture	50,741	347	49,569	1,172
Coastal municipalities	14,278	76	14,040	238
Inland municipalities	36,463	271	35,529	934
2015 (after tsunami) (Unit: management farm)				
Total of Miyagi prefecture	38,857	560	37,602	1,255
Coastal municipalities	9,413	143	9,181	232
Inland municipalities	29,444	417	28,421	1,023
Increase/decrease rate (Unit: %)				
Total of Miyagi prefecture	-23.4	61.4	-24.1	7.1
Coastal municipalities	-34.1	88.2	-34.6	-2.5
Inland municipalities	-19.2	53.9	-20.0	9.5



Change in the number of agricultural enterprises by size of cultivated land
Source: Census of Agriculture and Forestry of Japan (2010 and 2015)



Consolidated farmland after reconstruction (1984 & 2022)

Reclaiming Farming as a source of *ikigai* (meaning in life)

Why did some farmers return to farming?

Interviews revealed that many experienced a sense of "having nothing to do" after the tsunami.

Due to retirement from farming, the dispersal of local communities caused by relocation, and changes in lifestyle, they feel a deep sense of loss.

Narratives of *Nothing to do*

"Stay in this apartment. All day long. I have never lived like that. I always went to the farmland morning till night. I can't do that because of the tsunami. It's painful to not be able to do anything. I am not happy to have a house. This is my true feeling and I think everyone does. We've been living like that for 40 years, so we can't do anything about it."
(a woman farmer, 60s)



Relationships with others

- Social interaction has decreased due to housing relocation and retirement
- Farming is an opportunity for social interaction

ikigai



Reclaiming a Sense of Self

- Confidence in their skills and knowledge
- Pride in being a farmer
- A renewed sense of purpose in life

A Care Activity for Disaster Survivors

Creating Meaningful Roles and Work Opportunities

One example of care for elderly people was the *Healthy Agriculture* program by an NPO in Watari-town. In this program, participants work together to cultivate fields and share a lunch. Most participants are seniors in their 60s to 80s. Many had been self-employed farmers, shop owners, or part-time workers before the disaster, and would likely have continued working had the disaster not occurred.

This program also addressed *the problem of double loss* associated with housing reconstruction. Despite the withdrawal of institutional and external support over time, long-term care continued through the efforts of different actors, sustaining spaces of belonging for survivors.



Double Loss of Community (Loss of both hometown and temporary housing communities)

Discussion & Conclusion

- Post-disaster displacement involved more than the loss of housing and livelihoods. It disrupted the social relationships, roles, identities, and everyday practices through which people had made sense of their lives.
- For some former farmers, returning to farming was not primarily about earning income.. Rather, it was a way of reclaiming meaningful roles, social connections, and continuity with their pre-disaster lives.
- The Healthy Agriculture Program* functioned as a form of long-term community-based care by creating opportunities for participation, belonging, and *ikigai* after displacement.



Restoration of Rural Ways of Life

Research Implications

1. Beyond Economic Recovery

Disaster recovery should address not only survival, but also life: supporting mental well-being, social connections, meaningful roles, and *ikigai*.

2. Care Through Meaningful Work

Creating meaningful roles and work opportunities can function as an important form of post-disaster care by supporting social connections, self-worth, and well-being. Opportunities to engage in farming, craftwork, and other familiar activities can help restore purpose and belonging.

3. Long-Term Community-Based Care

Recovery requires long-term support systems that can be sustained within local communities, NPOs, and citizen initiatives beyond formal recovery programs.

Acknowledgement

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Reference

Bourdieu, Pierre & Abdelmalek Sayad, 1964, Paysans déracinés. Bouleversements morphologiques et changements culturels en Algérie, *Études rurales* Année 12, 56-94. (=Loïc Wacquant, Richard Nice, and Tarik Wareh, trans., 2004, Colonial Rule and Cultural Sabir, *Ethnography* 5(4): 445-86.



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