

Summary by the Chairperson of the Implementation Committee

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The reasons for holding the International Forum on Telling Live Lessons from Disasters

In many disaster-hit areas, various activities are in place to transmit experiences and lessons of disasters through various media: oral story-telling, films, images, artifacts, monuments and artistic works. Such activities communicate local history, deepen our understanding of the bonds between ourselves and the meaning of co-existence with nature, and remind us of the importance of life. “Live Lesson Telling” has many possibilities, and it is a very important activity for the whole of society because it increases our awareness of the necessity of protecting our lives and the environment, gives motivation to reconstruct disaster-struck areas and to add resilience to regional development, and generates a sense of solidarity beyond regions. Live Lesson Telling activities have been implemented in disaster-affected areas worldwide although networks or systems have not yet been formed, in order to exchange information which will unite individual activities and promote interactions.

It was with these issues in mind that the International Forum on Telling Live Lessons from Disasters took place. The objectives of the forum were as follows: to strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between those committed to Live Lesson Telling activities around the world; to appeal widely for the importance and continuation of such initiatives; to examine the significance and process of Live Lesson Telling; and to promote the continual implementation of Live Lesson Telling activities on a global scale, with the aim of strengthening measures for the prevention and mitigation of disasters in the future.

The Forum is a place where people can get together and exchange views on an equal footing. It is also a place where participants can deepen their understanding of the realities and challenges of their respective activities, as well as being a hands-on place, based on mutual understanding. In other words, it is a practical place where participants may honestly talk about doubts they have in their activities, solutions they are striving to discover, and answers they are searching for. Here they may think together, and discover paths and clues for new ways of thinking, although they may not be able to find answers immediately. Live Lesson Telling activities are conducted by people in various walks of life, including those who have experienced disasters, researchers, teachers, and practitioners. Among them, there are some people who try to pass on stories of disasters which occurred many generations ago. Respecting these various positions and specialties of the participants, we established this forum as a place to

discuss Live Lesson Telling on an equal footing.

Open Symposium “Thinking about the Live Lesson Telling of Disasters”

On the first day, the open symposium took place, and it was composed of two parts: tripartite talks, and a panel discussion. In the tripartite talks, three parties talked about how experiences of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake were translated into action as respectively a researcher, a teacher and a practitioner of international cultural exchanges and support activities in the affected areas. It was somehow very striking for the audience to hear the stories that they each attempted to pass on of their experience of disasters, and how they contributed to assistance activities in the affected areas and to future disaster prevention with a strong will and a sense of responsibility. Ms. Thin Aye Aye Ko used the experience as a victim of a disaster to support another disaster-hit area. Her activity demonstrates that formerly affected areas may assist new ones in various ways, and this concretely shows that a chain of support is spreading globally. I listened to her carefully while feeling the passion of the individual who supports such practices.

I think that all the participants in the symposium felt the significance of the role which a song or music plays in the Live Lesson Telling of disasters by singing together “In Hope of Delivering Happiness”, written and composed by Makoto Usui. Although this forum did not directly take up the question of how artistic works, a method of Live Lesson Telling which appeals to human senses and emotions, should be integrated into our concerns, it is necessary in future to collect practical examples and to consider their effectiveness.

In the panel discussion, three speakers reported on their respective organizational activities, and then held a discussion, based on comments on these reports made by the other two speakers. New issues were also made clear. These included the ways of international cooperation currently being conducted, based on the various existing disparities, and the roles and effective methods of international Live Lesson Telling activities amid the aging of those who have experienced disasters, the growing mobility of the population, and the increasing meteorological disasters caused by global warming. When we look at the world, disasters are always occurring somewhere, and rehabilitation and reconstruction activities are being conducted. It seems important to treat the current status of other affected areas as our problem, to provide humanitarian and rehabilitation support, as well as to direct our attention always to our own disaster prevention and mitigation. In addition, participants in this forum were leaders in Live Lesson Telling activities, so we have high expectations for the establishment of knowledge management, in order that they may pass on to their successors ways to

launch and manage their respective activities.

Motives, Purposes, Significance and Method of the Live Lesson Telling of Disasters

Three themes had been set for the forum:

1. Why, for whom, and for what purpose do we preserve and disseminate the real live stories and lessons from the experiences of disasters?
2. How should we envision the significance of Live Lesson Telling activities for story tellers, listeners, and disaster-hit areas?
3. To make sure that such activities are effective, what must be considered in terms of delivery and method?

With due consideration to these themes, reports on Live Lesson Telling activities were made from twenty-two disaster-struck areas in the world.

Motives, purposes and significance of Live Lesson Telling

Individual experiences of disasters vary, and motives to pass on those stories also vary widely. In addition, the English title of this forum has “Live Lessons” in it, but the oral story-telling of these experiences is not invariably something which aims to convey lessons. Even if you wish to pass on lessons to the next generation or to other people, whether or not it is really useful is subject to various conditions such as the nature of the hazards, and the social or living environment. However, we can never say that such story-telling is meaningless because “it does not include lessons”, or “it is useless in disaster prevention and mitigation”. As long as someone has a motive to disseminate a story, such an action is meaningful at least to the person him/herself. In other words, we can say that it is something which reminds us of the importance of life. At the same time, it is not always true that all the activities of Live Lesson Telling of disasters have a rational purpose. There must be cases in which people repeatedly want to look at the meaning of their lives, and the meaning of the existence of those who were associated with them, by telling their experiences of disasters as a page of their personal histories.

Sometimes, there may be a situation when “experience”, “memory” and “Live Lesson Telling” do not take the form of a single cycle in a person’s mind. There are people who think it is important to speak about their experiences, but still have difficulty in doing so in reality. When they try to think back to the past and to speak about it, experiences of disasters reawaken in themselves. For them, these are not at all something that merely happened in the past. Rather, by the action of thinking back, past experiences become “ones which are just about to happen”. These issues such as memories and memory recall have been discussed over memories of war and conflict, but they are true

of experiences of disasters, too.

However, we must disseminate the experiences, records and memories of disasters for the future and for people in the future. In the tripartite talks on the first day of the forum, Mr. Makoto Usui said that “we should conduct Live Lesson Telling activities as a responsibility of the survivors”. A strong will is required in doing so.

Unlike wars and conflicts which are triggered by human beings, we cannot suppress the energies which come from the natural world only by the power of human beings. In that sense, causes of disasters always underlie everything, and disasters will continue to happen in the future. Human beings have to live, facing such natural disasters, and we have to make use of the wisdom gained from experiences of disasters in the past in coping with fresh natural disasters. In order to do so, we have to pass on to the future the experiences and memories of disasters owned by us and our ancestors. All individuals have limitations in doing this. People become older and finally die. As time goes by, the compositions of regional societies will change, and industrial structures will also change. Transportation and communication networks will also take different forms. It will become necessary beyond individuals to extract from many experiences of disasters explicit knowledge, which may contribute to future disaster prevention and mitigation, and to find a systematized way to preserve and disseminate such knowledge as a society. This is by no means an attempt to exclude individual experiences and memories.

Effective ways of Live Lesson Telling

When we speak of natural disasters, we tend to concentrate on the destruction of buildings and the loss and damage to human lives by the massive release of energy from the natural world. However, disasters are not only caused by the power of nature, but also by all the complicated relationships with human skills which create buildings and communication networks, and society and culture which include politics and economy. Therefore, disasters are becoming more complicated as a result of sophisticated skills and centralization of population and information. In addition, reconstruction from disasters cannot be achieved only by rebuilding infrastructures and houses. Since disasters do not damage only buildings, we should pay not a little attention to people’s heart, social and cultural problems. The effect of Live Lesson Telling would appear in these reconstruction and rehabilitation processes, the reduction of vulnerability to future disasters, and the processes to increase response capabilities.

We decided that “Live Lesson Telling” includes not only oral story-telling by people, but also pictures, images, things left behind, artifacts, monuments, music and paintings.

The media other than language can convey right messages only when compensated by language. Or they can surpass the expressive ability of language and convey messages directly to receivers. Needless to say, they also greatly depend on the decoding and understanding abilities of receivers. It seems necessary to think about how to develop such decoding and understanding abilities when we consider effective ways of conveying messages.

Experiences of disasters are personal, but levels of messages from such experiences could rise further by placing them in the context of the facts and treating them objectively. This requires correct understanding of disasters as incidents, and that in turn requires finding causes of disasters. In addition to hazard, causes of disasters include geographical environment, skills used for constructing buildings, social and cultural factors, and situations of information distribution. Experts from various areas are expected to be helpful.

In the second day of the forum, the sessions of “Telling Live Lessons and Museums”, “Telling Live Lessons as Disaster Prevention and Mitigation”, “Telling Live Lessons and Media”, and “Telling Live Lessons as Exchange” took place. As for the session “Telling Live Lessons and Museums”, three sections were organized by types of hazards. In one of the sections, Ms Marie-Paule Jungblut said that the basic roles of museums are ①collection and preservation, ②investigation and research, and ③display of intangible and tangible assets. She also pointed out that not only situations right after disasters but also the long-term recovery process should be provided as information, while disasters as incidents are displayed as a junction process of their causes. In this regard, the Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution displays the recovery and reconstruction process from the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake from various points of view. It can be applied to most disaster-related museums, but it is important to further incorporate the outcomes of social and cultural factors in causes of disasters.

It is often the case that issues such as ethnicity, gender, and the gap between the rich and the poor are behind the size of the damage and the progress in putting people’s lives back in order. A history exhibition is associated with memory and oblivion, and creates a contrast between standardized official memories and wide range of individual memories that underlie them. A history exhibition in a museum is a place of the selection of memories and the competition for memories. It is true that whether museums focus on historical portrayal and description or on future disaster prevention and mitigation depends on the purpose for which they were established, and it is difficult to treat them as a theme. However, bold activities are very much expected.

Museums are currently undergoing dramatic changes. They have changed from being

a place of learning where people meet “things” such as exhibits and materials to being a place whose function is that people meet someone through such “things” and develop what they have gained from such meetings. It is sometimes called the “next-generation museum”, and many museums expand functions and activities as forums. In the midst of such a trend, museums related to disasters are expected to change from a learning place which focuses on visual perception to a participatory one which requires using all the senses; and from a place which disseminates information through exhibits to one which expands and develops one’s world through a variety of media (audio-visual equipment, worksheets, events, workshops, and commentators). Furthermore, museums are expected to disseminate information about various Live Lesson Telling activities which are conducted outside of museums and also have a function to connect them.

Conclusion

In January 2005, the Disaster Reduction Forum 2005 was held in Kobe in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, and one year later, the International Disaster Transfer Live Lessons Network (TeLL-Net) was officially established in January 2006. The Network became a mother body of this forum. Then four years later from its establishment, “the International Forum on Telling Live Lessons from Disasters” took place in the same location, Kobe. It seems that Live Lesson Telling cannot be separated from disaster-hit areas.

For the time being, we will post on our website information such as summaries of reports and information materials on forums, with a summary of each session, and Live Lesson Telling activities which make up forum-related information. In the future, we will aim to build a portal site which encourages information-sharing and interaction among more people who are interested in Live Lesson Telling and thereby contribute to energizing activities which may lead to reconstruction of disaster-hit areas and to future disaster prevention and mitigation. At the same time, we will consider the possibility of holding a further forum.

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