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“Kobe”

While I was reading Mark Pelling’s articles, I kept thinking about Kobe, where M6 earthquake hit 10 years ago. The image I saw, the story I heard, and the reality I missed was unimaginable. Just two hours train ride away from where I lived, in the country of the second largest economy of the world, people were dying because an ambulance car could not reach the victims, because the infrastructure was destructed to the extent that no one could reach them, and because no one knew what to do.

Kobe recovered very quickly after the quake. I am not a specialist, but from what I hear and read, I have an impression that Kobe’s reconstruction was more than rebuilding physical infrastructure. Kobe became an inspiration for building “adaptive potential” for the rest of the nation. It is Kobe that proved our technology does not necessarily protect us, though it can make a difference. We saw many examples how earthquake-resistant architect or the lack of it made differences. We also learned how political structure failed Kobe. Japanese government was impotent to mobilize political power to help lives, which could have been saved. People in Kobe testify how local community and individual relationships (social capital, in Pelling’s articles) were crucial amidst of disaster and in the process of recovery.

For the last 10 years, public awareness of natural disaster increased in Japan. I underlined and nodded while I was reading Pelling articles. I could relate Mark Pelling articles with clear examples. Yes, physical structure only will not protect us. Yes, grass-roots level participation is crucial to build adaptive potential. Yes, it has to be done with multi-sector approach. Yes, the government alone cannot achieve this task, but the government’s participation is definitely necessary. And yes, Kobe was fortunate, with its economic power and the egalitarian society, the society was rebuilt very quickly.

Then, I paused. How do people receive Mark Pelling’s message, if his/her country never experienced disaster to the extent of Kobe? Building adaptive potential is resource consuming and demands imagination. It is a continuous process without a finish line. If one never really knew how destructive disaster can be, how can anybody be motivated to commit to this demanding task of linking social and political assets between vertically and horizontally? Especially if community members are struggling to get a day by, living in a post-conflict situation.

Furthermore, just as Kamanga et al. points out, if good number of community members are exposed from non-disaster hazard on daily basis, who would consume one’s time and energy to prepare for disaster that may or may not come? Ironically, or naturally, these are the people who are most vulnerable to disaster, not the people in Kobe. If they are vulnerable to the disaster, they are likely to be vulnerable to other hazard including conflict and diseases. Three of the readings suggest that that is where the external actors can come and encourage. However, even for Japanese people who experiences earthquake on regular basis and aware of the possible risk of earthquake, it took Kobe to realize, WE as individuals, households, community, and government, need to interact, cooperate, and linked in the face of disaster. But what about for those who face

other insecurity such as hunger, security and poverty? Pelling articles and Kamana et al. clearly points the direction for us to take, the question remains in my mind is how can an external actor be a positive impact to encourage the process.