

The “BENTO” (Lunch Box) Project: An alternative Cash for Work (CFW)?

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ABSTRACT: This paper introduces the “BENTO” project in which restaurants and food industries in a region damaged by a natural disaster provide lunch boxes (“BENTO” in Japanese) for the refugees and workers engaged in the recovery work. This project was first undertaken in Ojiya city, one of the sites of the 2004 Niigata Chuetsu Earthquake, and has since been implemented in Kashiwazaki city, one of the places that bore the brunt of the 2007 Niigata Chuetsu-oki Earthquake. In past disasters, most of the resources coming in by way of disaster response, including food and water, would have to be either imported or donated from outside the affected area. The BENTO project is the first attempt in Japan to institutionalize a disaster-response framework that provides resources from within the affected area, aiming at the generation of cash for damaged industries in exchange for the resources provided.

Keywords: disaster recovery, livelihood recovery, economic recovery, social capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recognition has long been growing in the international disaster response community that recovery of the livelihood of people affected by devastating disaster damage is one of the most critical issues. For example, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRCRCS) indicated that sustainable livelihood is a key to disaster resilience, stressing the need to consider income generation programs, such as participation of small local enterprises in reconstruction, and localizing purchase of recovery materials and inputs to plug the leak of the advantage away from the local economy (IFRCRCS, 2001).

On the other hand, Cash for Work (CFW) project has been developed for humanitarian assistance in post-disaster and conflict environments. CFW is a project in which the people affected are employed as labor for debris cleanup and reconstruction. As the payment for labor is made in cash, CFW is considered a less disruptive method than Food for Work (FFW), because it infuses cash into economies’ depleted monetary resources, and in some cases can stimulate the local economy (Doocy et al., 2006).

However, CFW might not be a universal tool for economic recovery, judging by the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (Kobe earthquake). Legislation obligating public projects in affected areas to hire a certain number of those rendered jobless by the earthquake—up to 40% of the total labor—was implemented in March 1995, two months after the earthquake occurred. But by February 1996, fewer than 30 people had been hired based on this law. There are two important factors behind this policy failure.

The first underlying factor was the industrial structure of Kobe’s economy. The massive reconstruction demand was expected to be the driving force for economic recovery. But the Kobe economy could not absorb such a large reconstruction demand because a large proportion—72.5% of the Kobe’s GDP in 1994—was produced by the tertiary industry. There was a quite significant mismatch between labor demand and supply after the earthquake. The ratio of job openings to applicants, as of August 1997, was 1.89 in construction, but only 0.22 for clerical workers. The industrial structure of the affected areas in large metropolitan districts consisted more of non-manual than manual labor. Career changes from non-manual to manual work were difficult because of the different requirements in physical strength, skill, and psychology (Nagamatsu, 2007). As a result, about 90% of the reconstruction demand was outsourced to the surrounding area (Nagamatsu, 2008).

The second factor was globalization. One solution to the leak of reconstruction demand would be to slow down the pace of reconstruction, in order for the local economy to be able to absorb it. However, globalization does not allow the affected economy to be suspended. Like other major cities, Kobe’s economy was also open to global competition. Due to the economic suspension for a certain period after the earthquake, Kobe’s industries were deprived of their market share by other cities. The port industry in Kobe was a good example. In the 1980s, the port of Kobe was the third largest in the world, but after the earthquake, Kobe port’s ranking dropped to 32nd by 2003. The chemical shoe industry (relatively cheap shoes made from plastic and gum) was an example. Cheaper products were being flown into the domestic market from East Asian countries, and the earthquake accelerated this trend. The level of employment in the Nagata chemical shoes industry in September 2007 was only 50% of pre-earthquake level. The situation would be much more severe if the reconstruction of the damaged infrastructure of Kobe had taken longer.

From this background, we can theoretically induce that 1) the current CFW framework has a limited application in a mature urban economy with a relatively small construction sector. CFW for reconstruction work would force people to change their current job to manual labor, which is not conducive to sustainability of the local economy. 2) If the damage is relatively minor, as compared with Aceh or Haiti, continuity of the economic activity should be taken into account. Empowering the existing

industries might provide people with a quick and easy solution for economic recovery, rather than requiring them exogenously to make a drastic job change. We need a different version of CFW, applicable to a broader range of situations.

2. The “BENTO” project

2.1 Ojiya project in 2004.

The “BENTO” project is a type of job creation scheme for local restaurants damaged by a disaster. Under this project, the local government procures for refugees individually packed meals (lunch boxes, in Japanese “BENTO”), organized by the damaged restaurants in the local producers’ union. Public utility companies also procure BENTOs for the workers engaged in reconstruction work. The union coordinates the production of the BENTOs, and the members of the union collaborate with one another to cover for the damage to each facility and workplace.

The first BENTO project was in Ojiya city, damaged by the 2004 Niigata Chuetsu earthquake disaster. About 30,000 refugees, virtually the whole city population, became refugees, mainly because of the heavy aftershocks and suspension of essential services. Ojiya city government initially procured refugees’ meals from outside the city, but this was time consuming due to traffic congestion. Ojiya city government, to avoid the risk of food poisoning, asked the local restaurants’ union to produce 8,000 BENTOs for refugees. Many members of the union were suffering from the cancelation of party and catering orders. Very few members could work because gas was cut off and facilities were damaged. Some members had even lost their buildings. The union leader decided to undertake the BENTO order, with the participation of 23 restaurants, to create job opportunities for them.

BENTO production, however, was not an easy task under disaster circumstances. The first problem was the size of the order compared to the number of participating restaurants. The union played a coordinating role to allocate BENTO production to the members. Some members who could not operate in their restaurants were expected to work for their rival restaurants as part-time assistants. The union also developed recipes for BENTOs, purchased the materials wholesale, and distributed recipes and materials for the allocated number of BENTOs. The second problem was the gas stoppage. The Union introduced a division of labor among restaurants, whereby the restaurants with gas were responsible for cooking, while others were responsible for packing.

Rice cooking was outsourced to the Echigoseika Co. Ltd., one of the major rice confectionary companies in Japan, originally founded in Ojiya city in 1946. Ojiya city government supplied raw rice to Echigoseika, partly because the government had bought rice from JA (Japan Agricultural association) to cook and serve it to refugees, and partly because a huge quantity of rice was donated from all over Japan. Uonuma Fishery Co. Ltd., normally operating as the public fish market, received the order from the government and provided BENTOs ingredients to the union, then delivered the BENTOs to the refugee sites. The whole structure of the BENTO project in Ojiya is shown in Fig. 1.

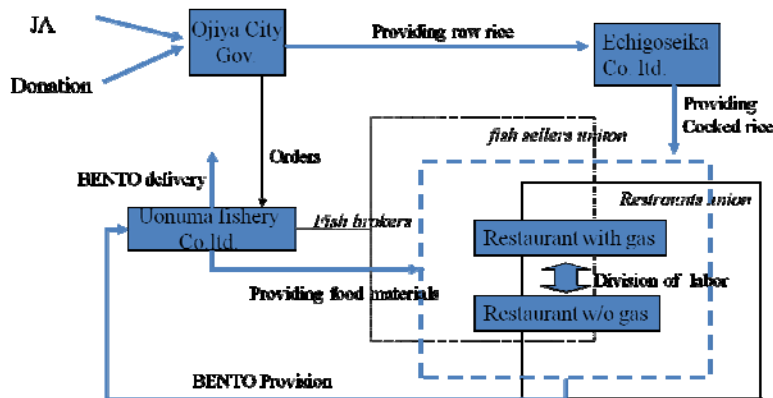


Fig. 1: The structure of BENTO project in Ojiya 2004.

3.2 Kashiwazaki project in 2007.

In Kashiwazaki city, which is only 50 km away to the northwest of Ojiya city, a big earthquake occurred on July 16, 2007. Although the earthquake damage was less than in the 2004 earthquake, the economic impact was very severe because operation of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa atomic power plant had to be suspended due to the damage to surrounding facilities.

Lessons from the Ojiya BENTO project were passed on by a number of union members, and the Kashiwazaki fish sellers’ union established the BENTO project scheme as shown in Fig. 2. There were two major differences from the Ojiya project. First, Kashiwazaki project not only supplied BENTOs to refugees but also to public utility company workers engaged in restoring essential services. Thanks to this, the union supplied thousands of BENTOs per day for several weeks. Second, the Kashiwazaki

project included almost all small restaurants and caterers in the city. Four other unions—Food & drink, Caterers, Sushi restaurants and Restaurants—participated in this project. This was partly because the number of BENTOs was so huge that a single union could not cover it. As a result, however, this scheme made this project more public purpose oriented. For example, Niigata prefectural government added an extra charge to the unit price of the BENTO fixed by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW). This extra cost was regarded as rational for public purposes, contributing to recovery of damaged restaurants, as this project covered almost all unions in the Kashiwazaki city.

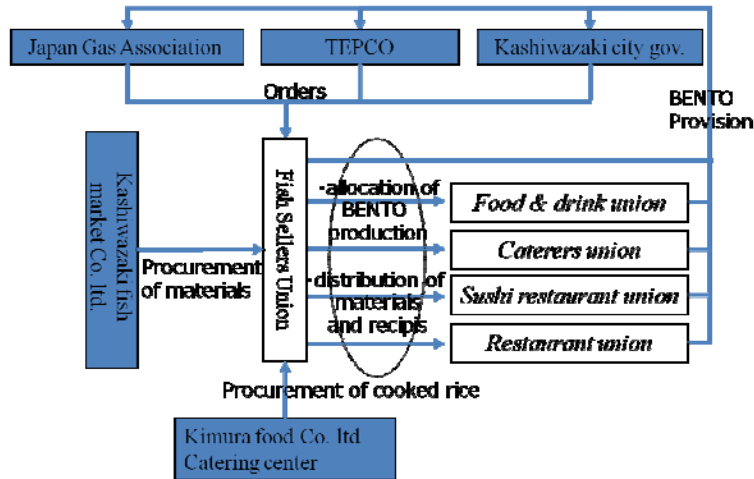


Fig. 2: The Plan of the Kashiwazaki BENTO project in 2007.

3. Advantages and disadvantages of the BENTO project

The BENTO project has several advantages and disadvantages as compared to the CFW project. The first advantage is that the BENTO project is neutral toward the original industrial structure. Participants in the BENTO project are professionals using their original skills and capabilities. Once regular economic activities recover, exit from the BENTO project and transition to the regular business is not so difficult. The second advantage is that this project is based on the existing social network such as the fish sellers' or restaurants' unions. Social capital, such as mutual trust and shared objectives for recovery, facilitates the plan, forming, operating, and cooperating on the BENTO project. In fact, the project even strengthens the ties among the participants, so much so that Kashiwazaki fish sellers' union tried developing a new original fish recipe, and it provided a big business opportunity to produce large numbers of BENTOs for various festivals and sports games.

One disadvantage, however, is the difficulty in generalizing the project. The driving organization, the fish sellers' union, is a local organization. Not every city has such a key organization. Although some cities, such as Kurashiki in Okayama, are trying to draw up a plan to establish a BENTO project in the event of disaster, it is necessary to provide support to an organization during the initial phase of the project. Another disadvantage of the BENTO project is the scale, because the money devoted to it is much smaller compared to reconstruction works. Some other market needs to establish a second BENTO project, such as clothing or laundry, for example. Consulting with the people affected by the disaster could potentially be a good job opportunity.

5. REFERENCES

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