

Chapter 13

Internationalization

13-1 Status, Challenges, and Prospects of Internationalization in Miyagi Prefecture

Introduction

About 15 years ago, Miyagi Prefecture became the first prefecture in Japan to enact an ordinance on the promotion of a multicultural society. Since then, it has suffered from the Great East Japan Earthquake, an unprecedented disaster, and then while preparations were underway for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics (which had been billed as the “Recovery Olympics”), COVID-19 led to the scaling back and postponement of the event to 2021. The impact was immeasurable for Miyagi Prefecture, which had planned to showcase its recovery from the disaster and express its gratitude for the support it had received from around the world. For a long time after the earthquake, the region was beset by harmful rumors and other obstacles to recovery, and the outflow of young workers further accelerated the depopulation afflicting communities that were dependent on seafood processing and agriculture. Border restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 blocked the admission of technical interns from abroad who had been compensating for this labor shortage. This was a major blow to the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises in Miyagi that make up its primary industries. Furthermore, Miyagi Prefecture has more foreign students than any other prefecture in the Tohoku region, but these students and their families were also affected by the disaster and the pandemic. Tohoku University, the largest university in the Tohoku region, which has been promoting internationalization in recent years, saw the number of foreign students drop significantly after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Against the backdrop of these circumstances, I will present the current status of internationalization in the prefecture and then set out the issues that need to be

addressed. In addition, this chapter will reflect on the nature of regionally-focused internationalization through case studies based on interviews with staff of the Miyagi International Association (MIA), which supports the promotion of a multicultural society in Miyagi Prefecture.

1 Current Status of Internationalization in Miyagi Prefecture**(1) Miyagi Prefecture from the Perspective of Foreign Residents**

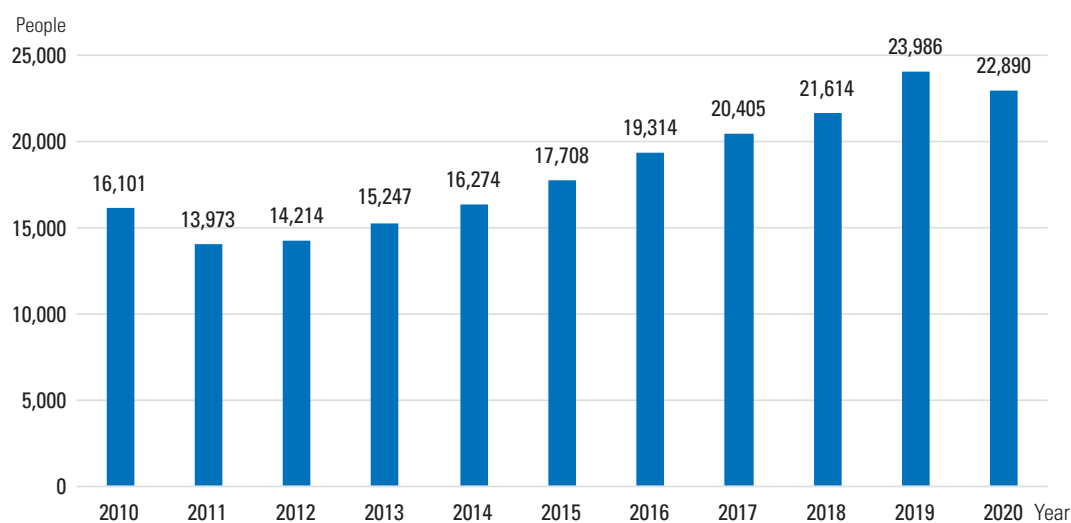
According to the Immigration Services Agency (2020), the number of foreign residents in Japan at the end of 2020 was 2,887,116 people, down 1.6% from the previous year. This figure had been steadily increasing by 6–7% each year since 2012 (which saw a drop in foreign residents as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake), so this represented the first decline in eight years. A breakdown by status of residence shows that the number of foreign students (-18.8%) and technical interns (-8.0%), who were subject to the government’s border restrictions, declined significantly. Foreign students and technical interns account for 9.7% and 13.1% of all foreign residents in Japan, together making up nearly a quarter of the total. This suggests that the overall decline can largely be explained by the decline in these categories, both of which were affected by the government’s counter-pandemic measures. The picture is similar in Miyagi Prefecture, but the decline of 4.6% is larger than the national average due to the high numbers of foreign students and technical interns. As shown in **Figure 13-1**, there were 22,890 foreign residents as of 2020. By country/region of origin, the largest proportion is

represented by China, followed by Vietnam, the Republic of Korea, and Nepal (Table 13-1). In terms of status of residence, permanent residents (23.3%) account for the largest share, followed closely by foreign students (22.3%) and technical interns (18.9%) (Table 13-2).

In recent years, the number of students from Vietnam and Nepal attending Japanese language schools and specialized training colleges in Sendai City has increased rapidly, changing the profile of foreign students in Miyagi

Prefecture. Tohoku University also stands out, not only in terms of having the largest number of students enrolled at a single institution, but also because it attracts students with diverse cultural backgrounds from approximately 100 countries and regions around the world. Everywhere you go, you can hear different languages across the campus. Over the past decade, the university has been expanding the number of courses that allow students to earn degrees taught entirely in English. This contributed to the steady increase in foreign students until the COVID-19

Figure 13-1: Number of foreign residents in Miyagi Prefecture



Source: Miyagi International Association, *Statistics on Foreign Residents*

Table 13-1: Number of foreign residents in Miyagi Prefecture by country/region of origin

Country/region	Number	Percentage
China	5,653	24.7%
Vietnam	4,741	20.7%
Republic of Korea	3,063	13.4%
Nepal	1,757	7.7%
Philippines	1,458	6.4%
Indonesia	958	4.2%
United States of America	685	3.0%
Myanmar	537	2.3%
Pakistan	377	1.6%
Thailand	377	1.6%
Taiwan	368	1.6%
Bangladesh	311	1.4%
Brazil	245	1.1%
Other	2,360	10.3%

Source: Miyagi International Association, *Statistics on Foreign Residents*

Table 13-2: Number of foreign residents in Miyagi Prefecture by status of residence

Status of residence	Number	Percentage
Permanent resident	5,330	23.3%
Student	5,111	22.3%
Technical intern trainee	4,316	18.9%
Special permanent resident	1,726	7.5%
Engineer/Specialist in humanities/ International services	1,463	6.4%
Dependent	1,295	5.7%
Spouse of Japanese national	948	4.1%
Designated activities	777	3.4%
Long-term resident	404	1.8%
Other	1,520	6.6%

Source: Miyagi International Association, *Statistics on Foreign Residents*

pandemic broke out.

However, once they step out of the university, foreign students are faced with a situation that falls far short of internationalization. The ATMs at local banks and local government notices are still only in the Japanese language, and therefore foreign students have to share their personal information with friends and acquaintances for translation and other assistance in their daily lives. When looking for housing, there are still properties that do not accept foreign nationals, and many students come to consult us about part-time jobs they were turned down for because of their nationality. As this suggests, even Sendai, the prefectural capital, has yet to establish a comfortable living environment for foreign residents.

The Tohoku region is home to many “marriage migrants” who moved to rural areas as brides after the Second World War, mainly from China and the Philippines. There was also a surge in so-called “newcomer” migration in the 1980s, particularly Brazilians of Japanese descent. Nevertheless, these foreigners were dispersed throughout the prefecture and always constituted minorities at the municipal level. The adjustments they had to make at that time to fit into the lifestyles imposed on them were probably quite considerable.

(2) Efforts to Create a Multicultural Society

Miyagi Prefecture became the first prefecture in Japan to enact an ordinance on the promotion of a multicultural society. The ordinance is said to have been triggered by the rapid increase in Japanese-Brazilians in Taiwa, located to the north of Sendai, around the year 2000, and the media coverage of conflicts between them and the local residents. In 2003, there were 1,041 registered foreign residents, accounting for more than 4% of the total population, which led to discussions on how government intervention could help foreign nationals and local residents live together in harmony. Nationwide, “newcomers” such as Japanese-Brazilians, who came to Japan in the late 1980s, were beginning to form permanent communities, and there was a growing awareness in Miyagi Prefecture that an increase in foreign workers was inevitable if it was to attract companies from outside the prefecture. This is thought to have led Miyagi Prefecture to enact the “Ordinance on the Promotion of the Formation of a Multicultural Society” a few years later. The number of

foreign workers in Japan was already increasing rapidly in areas with high concentrations of factories associated with the automotive industry, such as the Chubu region. For example, in 2006, the number of registered foreign residents in Aichi Prefecture was 208,514, or 2.9% of the total, which represented a very high proportion of the prefecture’s population. An estimated 36.6% of these were of Brazilian origin. In comparison, the number of registered foreign residents in Miyagi Prefecture in 2004 and 2006 was 16,484 and 16,091, respectively, less than one-tenth the number in Aichi Prefecture. Furthermore, this number declined following the closure of the factory in Taiwa, which led many Japanese-Brazilians to move out of the prefecture. Why, then, was the ordinance enacted?

Several documents examined by the author indicate that the ordinance was drafted at the strong request of the Governor of Miyagi Prefecture. Deliberations were held to enact the ordinance, but some people felt that the process was rushed. Therefore, when a new governor was elected, there were calls for the deliberations to be suspended, but in the end the new governor gave his approval. With the approval of Prefectural Assembly, the ordinance finally came into force. At the “Second Exchange of Opinions on the Promotion of Multicultural Coexistence” held on November 16, 2009, Miyagi Prefecture stated that the reasons the ordinance was enacted in Miyagi (where the number of foreign residents is not particularly large) were that:

“(1) Against a backdrop of fewer children, demographic aging, and globalization, there has been an increase in the number of foreign nationals living and settling in the prefecture. In order to maintain the vitality of local communities, it is necessary to create a society in which all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, etc., can maximize their potential.

(2) With the challenges that come with a dispersed, rather than clustered, population of foreign residents, a multicultural perspective is essential for Miyagi Prefecture to realize a prosperous and vibrant society.”

Some observers have pointed out that the new Governor had a keen interest in formulating and promoting policies that would contribute to the development of the local economy, and that he recognized the potential

of the publicity for attracting businesses. This led to the first prefectural-level ordinance for the promotion of a multicultural society in Japan.

2 Challenges Regarding Internationalization in Miyagi Prefecture

In 2007, Miyagi Prefecture established an Advisory Committee for the Promotion of a Multicultural Society to study and discuss matters related to the drafting and implementation of policy measures based on the ordinance. The Committee is made up of members of different nationalities, ethnicities, and other cultural backgrounds, who work in various fields. They are appointed by the Governor and discuss proposed policies. The author has also served on the committee for the past 10 years and has been involved, albeit in a small way, in promoting the development of a multicultural society in Miyagi Prefecture. The Miyagi Prefecture Multicultural Society Promotion Plan, which was also discussed at this committee, was drawn up in March 2009, and again extended for a second phase five years later in March 2014. The third phase of the plan, which was established in 2019, is currently underway.

The number of foreign residents was around 16,000 when the initial plan was drawn up. It temporarily declined after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 but has continued to increase since then. The diversity of foreign residents, as reflected in place of origin and status of residence, is also increasing. So what kind of challenges do these foreign residents face and what kind of support do they need?

Figure 13-2 compares excerpts from the *Survey of Foreign Residents* conducted by Miyagi Prefecture in 2012 (five years after the ordinance was enacted) and the same survey in 2017. Regarding interactions with Japanese people, the number of respondents who said they “have someone with whom I can talk to about anything” decreased to less than half (24.2%) in 2017, compared to 52% in 2012, and the number of respondents who said “(I) have someone with whom I can chat with occasionally” also decreased from 34% to 24.5%. Meanwhile, those who responded that they did not have any interactions at all increased almost

threefold from 4% to 11.8%. Regarding the desire to interact with Japanese people, “I want to learn about Japanese culture and customs,” “I want to participate more in local events,” and “I don’t particularly want to interact” all increased in 2017, surpassing the figures for 2012. Conversely, the number of respondents wishing to participate in social activities such as volunteer work or activities that involve building close relationships, such as going out to eat or shopping together, decreased. In terms of situations in which they had unpleasant experiences, 2017 exceeded 2012 in almost all situations, except “when looking for a job” and “children at school, etc.” The increase is particularly noticeable in situations essential to daily life, such as “at work” (35% → 42.6%) and “when shopping or eating out” (13% → 20.9%). Moreover, perhaps due to the spread of the internet, the percentage of respondents who had bad experiences “through information from the media such as TV and the internet” doubled from 8% to 16.5%.

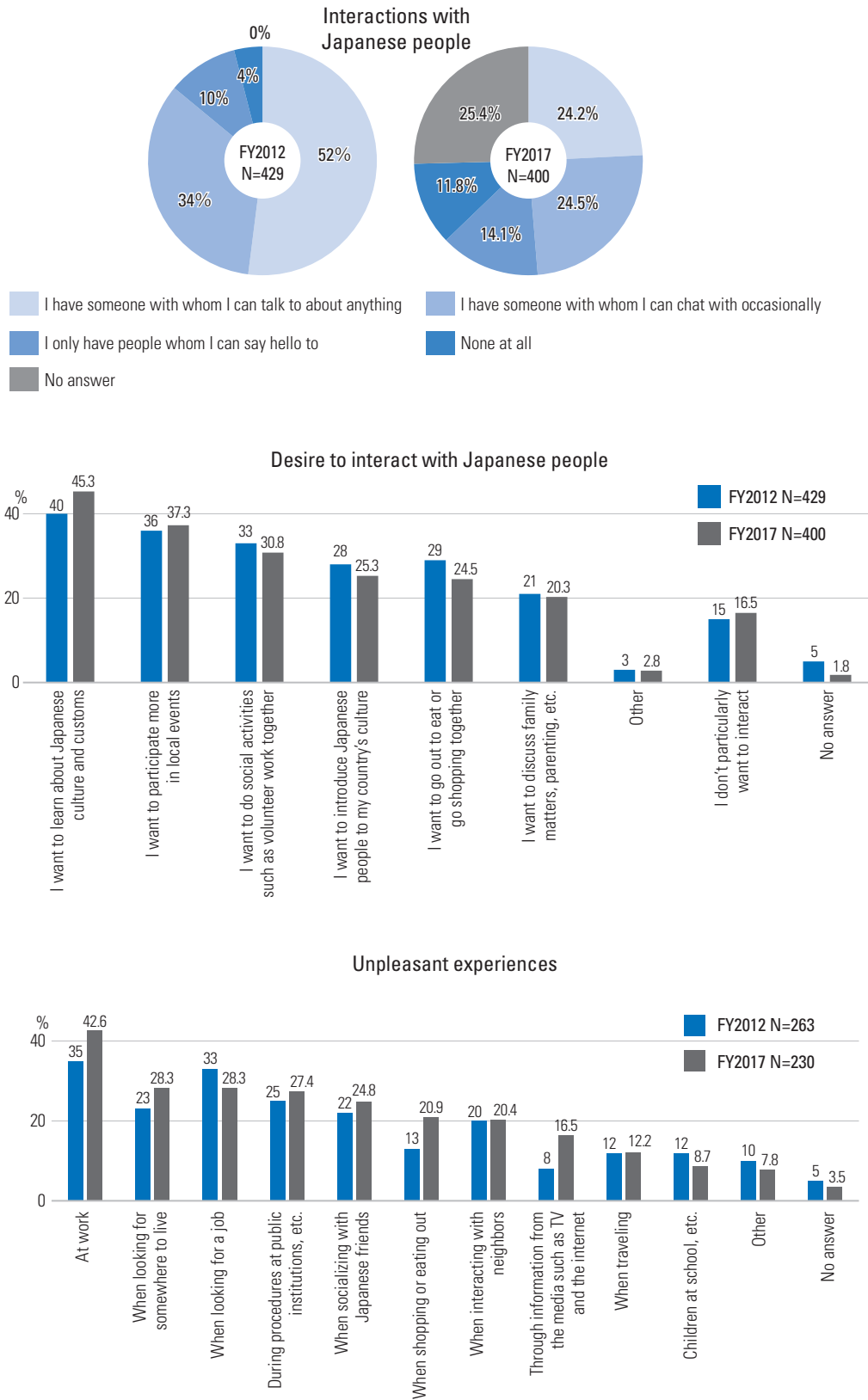
From these surveys, it is not possible to identify any major achievements made by the Multicultural Society Promotion Plan, and the results for several items could be seen as a step backward. The small but growing number of foreign residents who responded that they “don’t particularly want to interact” with Japanese people reveals the existence of foreign residents who may want to participate in activities to learn about Japan, but are not interested in close interaction with Japanese people. However, these surveys do not indicate why the subjects chose the answers they did. To better understand the challenges faced by foreign residents, it is necessary to try to verify them through follow-up surveys, such as interviews, and qualitative analyses.

3 Interviews with Full-Time MIA Staff

(1) Establishment and Development

The Miyagi International Association (MIA) is an integral part of Miyagi Prefecture’s efforts to promote a multicultural society. As of April 2021, the MIA consisted of seven full-time employees and six part-time foreign consultants with connections to foreign countries, supported by “interpreter supporters” and instructors who teach Japanese to foreign residents. The participants in this survey were one regular staff member and two foreign consultants.

Figure 13-2: Results from Miyagi Prefecture’s Survey of Foreign Residents (2012, 2017)



Source: Miyagi Prefecture, Survey of Foreign Residents

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2021 to obtain their thoughts on project development, challenges, and future prospects at the MIA.

The MIA's predecessor was the Miyagi Overseas Association, established in 1955 primarily to support Japanese emigrants to South America and their families who remained behind. In 1987, it was reborn as the "Miyagi International Exchange Association" to promote cross-cultural interaction, before changing its name to the Miyagi International Association when it became a public interest incorporated foundation in 2012. The organization's name in Japanese also incorporated the word "internationalization" to reflect the activities that had become the focus of its efforts, namely helping foreign residents adjust to life in Japan and providing support in their daily lives. Initially, the association's operations consisted mainly of exchange activities with foreign residents, but from around 1990, there was an increase in foreign women who migrated to the rural areas of Miyagi Prefecture to marry Japanese men. These women began to ask for assistance, so the organization began to provide support to them. Since then, it has expanded the scope of its support to include foreign children at Japanese schools and foreign technical interns, and is currently expanding its operations to a wide range of areas.

(2) MIA's Activities

The MIA focuses on projects related to support for foreign residents, such as Japanese language courses, training courses for Japanese language volunteers, establishment of multilingual consultation services for foreign residents, production of various guidebooks, and training of "interpreter supporters." It also conducts educational activities for foreign residents in the prefecture. When the prefecture held the "Miyagi Foreign Residents Roundtable" in 2004 in preparation for the enactment of the multicultural coexistence ordinance, the MIA recommended foreign participants and helped establish the prefecture's first forum for dialogue with foreign residents. Since then, it has continued to conduct awareness-raising activities by cooperating with the prefecture's multicultural coexistence symposiums as a joint hosting organization. This expansion of support for foreign residents and other related parties has become a resource for the prefecture and has led to several commissioned projects.

(3) Recipients of Support

When Interviewee X (a full-time employee) arrived at MIA in April 1999, most of the recipients of support were still immigrant women from China and South Korea who had married Japanese men, and most of the consultations were related to relationships with husbands and relatives, domestic violence, and related problems. Many of the participants in the Japanese language course were also these immigrant spouses. In recent years, the number of "marriage migrant" women has decreased while the number of foreign technical interns has increased, especially after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Mutual assistance activities amongst foreign residents surged after the earthquake, with support groups set up by people from China, the Philippines and other countries for their respective compatriots. MIA provides indirect support by providing facilities for sessions offering advice support and opinion exchanges. As information to confirm people's safety and about evacuation buses outside of the prefecture was not conveyed promptly to foreign residents following the Great East Japan Earthquake, foreign residents voluntarily took action to organize themselves, with MIA providing support. MIA collects information on volunteer associations of foreign residents and publishes it on its website for new foreign residents who move to Miyagi Prefecture.

(4) Policy on Projects

Like regional international associations in other prefectures, MIA has been carrying out its work under commission from Miyagi Prefecture, but it is less dependent on the local government than its counterparts in other prefectures. Since its establishment, it has maintained a certain degree of independence and self-sufficiency in implementing its projects. As such, it has taken on the challenge of cutting-edge initiatives that other organizations have not. One example is the dispatch of "interpreter supporters" in the field of healthcare. MIA began this work in response to the frequent requests for assistance from public health nurses for their work with immigrant spouses. During the spate of bids for international events such as the World Cup, the decision was taken to develop this work as a regular project. This project, in which trained "interpreter supporters" accompany foreign residents and provide interpretation at insured medical institutions, is

highly appreciated not only by the residents but also by the healthcare providers.

MIA was also quick to provide support for foreign technical interns. In recent years, support for foreign technical interns has become more extensive, but at the time, local governments were at a loss as to what kind of support measures to put in place. MIA's activities aimed to connect isolated technical interns with the local community and attracted the interest of local governments and regional internationalization associations in other prefectures, who often ask MIA for more information. MIA's distinctive character comes from the fact that it conducts its support work on the principle of listening to the voices on the ground and reflecting them in their activities, tailoring them to the needs of foreign residents and the local communities that host them.

(5) Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Countermeasures

The outbreak of COVID-19, which swept the world in early 2020, has disrupted many activities involving face-to-face interaction. For MIA, the loss of information-gathering opportunities was a considerable blow because it had always emphasized getting out into the field, listening to the issues faced by foreign residents and their supporters, and developing support projects on such issues. Since many activities, including Japanese language classes, training for Japanese language volunteer instructors across municipalities, interpreter support, and consultation services for foreign residents, were based on face-to-face contact and designed to involve a large number of volunteers, there was a risk that some might not be able to continue. During the surge in infections in Sendai City, staff members received requests from outlying municipalities to refrain from visiting because of the risk of transmission.

However, MIA's activities had to be continued for the sake of the foreign residents and supporters who needed its assistance. Various training sessions and liaison meetings were held using Zoom and other online tools for the first time. Japanese language courses, multicultural understanding awareness activities involving the dispatch of foreign volunteers to schools, and interpretation support were also gradually shifted online. There was also an increase in the number of consultations directly related to

the pandemic. These included consultations from persons in poor health and their families; foreign residents in difficulty because of reduced income or loss of employment resulting from work stoppages or downsizing; foreign residents wishing to return to their home countries; and foreign residents and family members who were unable to return to Japan. Recognizing the need for first-hand information, MIA took action by expanding the number of languages supported on its website.

Due to the pandemic, all exchange events between foreign technical interns and residents were canceled. Interviewee X was concerned that the inability to make contacts through exchanges, which is the first step in providing support for multicultural coexistence, as well as the reduced opportunities to identify issues and needs on the ground or build relationships with foreign residents and supporters in each municipality, would undermine MIA's key strength — its connection to the front lines — which in turn could lead to the stagnation of its activities. On the other hand, the switch to online activities led to an expansion of interpretation services and other forms of support, which distance had made difficult to provide in the past. For example, working in Kesenuma City, which hosts many technical interns, requires several hours of travel from Sendai, making it difficult to deploy interpreters. However, today, online tools can be used as long as the person making the request has an internet connection. MIA had been providing interpreting support over the telephone for some time, so the switch to an online mode was relatively easy. In this way, its wealth of previous experience helped it to adapt quickly to the crisis.

(6) Future Prospects

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of multicultural coexistence among the prefecture's residents. The term “multicultural coexistence” can now be heard in conversations with local university students and in high school study presentations. The need to explain the concept of multicultural coexistence from scratch has diminished, and there is a real sense that the people of Miyagi are now familiar with the concept. This suggests that there are more opportunities for addressing cross-cultural understanding and multicultural coexistence in school education, which can be taken as a sign

of the success of Miyagi Prefecture's policies and MIA's ongoing awareness-raising activities.

The diversification of the foreign population living in Miyagi will likely continue, given the increase in technical interns, the establishment of a new system for immigration for foreign nationals with specified skills under the 2018 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, and the recent increase of foreign nationals working under the category of engineer/specialist in humanities/international services. Already in some areas, the number of Pakistanis operating used car businesses is increasing, and inquiries about educational assistance for the families accompanying them, especially their children, are on the rise. As the communities where foreign residents are concentrated continue to change, prefectural residents who have never had contact with non-Japanese people will have more opportunities to think about multicultural coexistence.

The key to addressing the diverse issues and needs of foreign residents and local communities is to strengthen partnerships between local governments and other organizations. Some municipalities have already implemented their own support measures for foreign residents. For example, Ishinomaki and Kesenuma (which both host a large number of foreign technical interns) offer their own Japanese language classes and exchange programs, while Shiogama devised a support package with the support of the city's mayor for foreign residents whose livelihoods have been adversely affected by the pandemic. It is hoped that these model cases of local governments implementing projects on their own initiative will spread to other municipalities. Going forward, strengthening partnerships with organizations other than local governments will also become even more important for MIA. For example, Tagajo, which is actively working to realize a multicultural society, has incorporated collaboration with non-profit organizations into its policies. Meanwhile, Shibata is focusing on projects aimed at foreign visitors and has launched activities to promote "Easy Japanese" in the community, in cooperation with the Social Welfare Council. Iwanuma City has outsourced work to the Japan Overseas Cooperative Association (JOCA), while the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has consulted with the MIA about collaboration. These examples show that the promotion of multicultural coexistence,

which used to be led by municipalities, is now expanding to other organizations. The diversification of stakeholders involved in supporting foreign residents is expected to continue, leading to more support for foreign residents and further development of MIA's operations.

4 Conclusion

Drawing on the results of various surveys and case studies based on interviews with staff of the Miyagi International Association (MIA), this section has presented an overview of the current status of internationalization in Miyagi Prefecture, focusing on prefectural policies, achievements, and challenges. It revealed that, having experienced the successive crises of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic, the MIA did not stop its efforts to study measures to overcome hardships and put measures in place, which led to positive results. The promotion of a multicultural society has been driven by its attitude of "turning a crisis into an opportunity," as well as a kind of obstinate perseverance underpinned by physical stamina. Another point is diversification. This refers to not only diversifying the kind of support provided in response to the increasing diversity of foreign residents (including students). It also refers to the diversification of the support community, which came about through greater collaboration among those involved in providing assistance. I believe that if foreign residents and their supporters continue to work together to communicate the value of multicultural coexistence, Miyagi will become a wealthy prefecture in the truest sense of the word.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Mr. Takahiro Oizumi of the Miyagi International Association for his cooperation in coordinating the survey.

Written by Kazuko Suematsu

13-2 Issues Regarding Multicultural Coexistence Revealed by COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic cast a shadow over people’s daily lives across the world. In particular, it had a significant impact on foreign residents and other minorities. In the past, differences in language and culture, as well as their right to residency, have placed foreign residents in a vulnerable social position. Despite this, foreign nationals are considered a valuable “labor force” in Japan, which is now suffering from a shortage of workers. Although various problems remain, foreign employees have been actively recruited in recent years.

However, when the COVID-19 pandemic restricted the movement of people across borders and the economy stagnated, a variety of problems became apparent in terms of how foreign nationals actually led their everyday lives. In this sense, the pandemic prompted a reexamination of “multicultural coexistence” in Japanese society. Against this backdrop, this section presents a case study of a consultation service for foreign residents in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture.

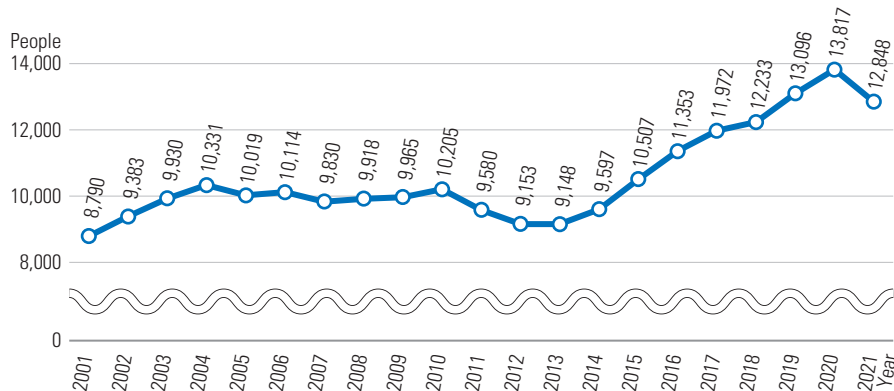
1 Increasingly Multicultural Communities

In recent years, communities across Japan have become

increasingly multicultural. According to the Immigration Services Agency, the number of foreign residents in Japan was 2,823,565 as of the end of June 2021. Although the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 2.2% decrease in foreign residents compared to the end of 2020, the figure for 2011 was 2,047,349, indicating a steady overall increase from ten years ago. Similarly, Sendai City saw a temporary drop in foreign residents following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, but the number has been on an upward trend ever since (Figure 13-3).

Moreover, although the Japanese government has consistently stated that it does not have a “policy of immigration,” a shift is now underway. One change is the amendment to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (the “Immigration Act”) in 2018, which established a new category called “specified skilled worker.” This status of residence is for foreign nationals with a certain level of expertise and skills who are ready to work immediately, and is a response to the growing labor shortage in industrial fields that have difficulty in securing personnel. In conjunction with the revision of the Immigration Act, the government also began to revise its policy with the “Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals.” It was in the middle of these developments that the COVID-19 pandemic struck.

Figure 13-3: Number of foreign residents in Sendai City (as of April 30 of each year)



Source: Sendai City

2 Support for Foreign Nationals in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Sendai City

What problems did foreign residents face during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how have local communities responded? Many answers can be found by looking at the work of a consultation service for foreign residents in Sendai City. This service represents the “border” of a multicultural society, where foreign nationals who have problems seek advice on a daily basis.

(1) About the Sendai Multicultural Center

Sendai City established a consultation service for foreign residents called the Sendai Multicultural Center (Figure 13-4) in June 2019, in response to the aforementioned

Figure 13-4: Sendai Multicultural Center



“Comprehensive Measures for Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals.” The Center is operated by the Sendai Tourism, Convention and International Association under contract from the Sendai City Government. Table 13-3 outlines the Center’s consultation response system.

The system has three main features. The first is the assignment of “multilingual counselors” who speak Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, or Nepali. In addition to Chinese and Korean, the number of foreign residents whose native languages are Vietnamese and Nepali has been increasing rapidly, so it is important to offer consultation services in these languages. In addition, the system can support a total of 19 languages through the use of three-way calls (using a system called “triphone”). The second is regular consultation sessions held in cooperation with the Sendai Bar Association and other professional organizations. For example, when providing counseling on international divorces, it is necessary to consider which country’s law applies (governing law) and the nationality of each spouse. The impact of divorce on the residence status of the parties involved may also need to be considered. Dealing with these highly specialized consultations requires collaboration with professional organizations (Figure 13-5). The third is providing “accompaniment services” in cooperation with civic groups. For foreign residents with different languages and cultures, procedures at government offices can be very difficult and stressful. In these situations, it can be reassuring to be accompanied by a local resident. Please refer to Table 13-4 (categorized by language) and Table 13-5 (categorized by method) for the Multicultural Center’s consultation response records for FY2020.

Table 13-3: Overview of Sendai Multicultural Center’s consultation response system (FY2021)

Full-time staff	7 (English- or Chinese-speaking staff). In addition, a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) is available two days a week.
Multilingual consultants	Available for Korean (Monday), Chinese (Tuesday or Saturday), Vietnamese (Wednesday), and Nepali (Friday).
Interpreter support phone	Communication support through three-way calls (“triphone”). A partnership has been established with a multilingual call center to provide support in 19 languages.
Specialized consultations	Consultation meetings for foreign residents are held regularly in cooperation with professional organizations. Sendai Immigration Bureau (monthly), Sendai Bar Association (monthly), Miyagi Certified Administrative Procedures Legal Specialist Association (monthly), Miyagi Labor Bureau (every other month), Tohoku Certified Public Tax Accountants’ Association (every three months)
Accompaniment volunteers	Accompaniment support is provided by OASIS, a support group for foreign residents. Volunteers accompany the person to daycare centers, child development counseling, and support centers, driver’s license centers, banks, etc. (78 cases in FY2020)

❖ Figure 13-5: Consultation service provided by the Miyagi Certified Administrative Procedures Legal Specialist Association at the Sendai Multicultural Center



(2) Support for Foreign Residents during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Multicultural Center began receiving consultations and inquiries related to COVID-19 around January 2020. In late March, several people, including an assistant language teacher (ALT), were confirmed to have been infected at a restaurant in Sendai City, leading to a surge in consultations from foreign residents concerned about infections and reporting suspicious symptoms. These consultations were passed on to a specialized call center, set up by Miyagi Prefecture and Sendai City, and communication support was provided through three-way calls (“triphone”). The Center also took on the role of liaising and coordinating with health centers and medical facilities, as necessary.

Subsequently, there was a sharp increase in the number of consultations on poverty from around May. In particular, since Sendai is home to many Japanese language schools and vocational schools, consultations from foreign students at these institutions began to pour in, including issues such as difficulties in paying school fees due to the sharp drop in part-time work, not being able to pay rent, and running out of food. The Center cooperated with the Sendai City Social Welfare Council to provide information on “Special Loans for COVID-19” and helped coordinate appointments for applications. Together with Food Bank Sendai, the Center also helped the Social Welfare Council to provide food to foreign residents by publicizing and providing venues for these activities. Staff members continued to provide attentive services, while also paying close attention to their own health.

❖ Table 13-4: Record of Sendai Multicultural Center’s consultation services for FY2020 (by language)

Language	Cases	Percentage
Japanese	1,825	61.9
English	638	21.6
Nepali	236	8.0
Chinese	167	5.7
Vietnamese	56	1.9
Tagalog	8	0.3
Korean	6	0.2
Other	13	0.4
Total	2,949	100.0

❖ Table 13-5: Record of Sendai Multicultural Center’s consultation services for FY2020 (by method)

Method	Cases	Percentage
Triphone	1,034	35.1
Visit	916	31.1
Telephone (non-triphone)	770	26.1
Email	227	7.7
Written correspondence (faxes, letters, etc.)	2	0.1
Total	2,949	100.0

In October, a cluster occurred at a vocational school dormitory in Sendai City, infecting more than 100 foreign students. Drawing on its existing network of vocational schools and Japanese language schools, the Sendai Tourism, Convention and International Association made further efforts to communicate with foreign residents, providing information in multiple languages on preventing infection and livelihood support, as well as gathering feedback on the situation at each school. In FY2020, the Multicultural Center provided communication support on 514 occasions.

In the spring of 2022, the Center also began providing information and consultations regarding vaccinations. Information was made available in multiple languages, and individual consultations were also provided on issues such as the inability to make reservations for vaccinations (for example, on websites written only in Japanese).

3 Issues Revealed by the COVID-19 Pandemic

(1) Emergence of Problems in Local Communities

Through the consultations that came in during the pandemic, it became clear that COVID-19 had brought

problems that had long existed in local communities to the surface. One such problem was information accessibility in the medical sector. In a regional city like Sendai, few medical facilities provide services in foreign languages. This was a particularly serious problem during the pandemic, with some foreign residents expressing severe anxiety over issues such as not being able to receive PCR tests. Other problems were laid bare in consultations with foreign students. Students who had come to Japan with the expectation of using income from part-time jobs to pay for school and living expenses faced a variety of issues. These included not only impoverishment as a result of the pandemic, but also contractual problems with their schools and the closing of their path to higher education and employment in Japan. On the other hand, some schools that had previously admitted many foreign students reported that they would find it difficult to continue their operations if the situation continued (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, October 21, 2021).

These are structural problems that existed before the pandemic. Japan has been actively accepting foreign students and other foreign nationals as part of its labor force, but has not yet developed systems for accommodating them in daily life.

(2) Perspectives Required for “Multicultural Coexistence” Policies

The structural problems noted above will not be easy to solve, but we must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic. Several issues have become apparent through the efforts undertaken so far. One is the issue of information accessibility for foreign nationals. Since the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, local governments have developed systems to provide information in multiple languages when a disaster occurs. However, there has not been sufficient confirmation that this information is reaching the people who need it. Although the issue of effective multilingual information persisted during the pandemic, it is notable that the Japanese government has made proposals that take the foreign community into account, calling for “cluster measures that go further than before” in terms of “supporting the foreign community, communicating information in multiple languages and Easy Japanese, and establishing multiple channels for consultation.” It has also recommended “information dissemination with dialogue,” in that “information should be provided based on

an understanding of the feelings and perceptions of the recipients, and the effects and impact of messages should be confirmed.” (Cabinet Secretariat Expert Committee on Countermeasures against Novel Influenza, etc., 14th Subcommittee Meeting on Countermeasures against COVID-19, November 9, 2020). “Information accessibility” is not a one-way street between the sender and receiver of information; it is something that can only be achieved through communication. In this sense, the inclusion of the issue of communication with the foreign community in government policies is a major step forward. In Sendai, foreign residents themselves have been participating in solving local issues, such as local disaster drills and guidance for children from foreign backgrounds to enter high school. It is hoped that the experience of the pandemic will serve as a catalyst for encouraging foreign residents to participate as leaders on policies in a variety of areas.

4 Conclusion

In 1965, the Swiss writer Max Frisch said of the problem of foreign workers, “We asked for workers. We got people instead.” remarks that are still instructive in Japan today, more than half a century later. When the COVID-19 pandemic eventually subsides, Japan is likely to bring in foreign workers at an ever-increasing rate to compensate for the decline in the working population. However, the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic must not go to waste — it is essential to put in place an environment and mutual understanding for accepting foreigners, not only as a labor force, but also as people leading their lives in Japan. Unless this is done, we will not be able to realize the kind of sustainable society set out in the SDGs. In light of the core objective of the SDGs, “multicultural coexistence” may also be redefined as human security. It is here that the essential meaning of multicultural coexistence emerges. That is, coexistence is not only a matter of human security for foreign residents of Japan but also for all of us who live here, regardless of the boundaries between “foreigners” and “Japanese.” All people living in the local community are parties to a multicultural coexistence, and it is their activities that will build a society where no one is left behind.

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