From Distress to Dialogue

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The accident at Fukushima, like Chernobyl 25 years earlier, left hundreds of thousands of people suddenly faced with the radioactivity in their daily environment speechless and completely disarmed. It also unleashed a storm of comments and pronunciations that have left the people affected by the radioactivity in total disarray.

Despite the timeliness and vastness of the efforts at all levels to cope with the consequences of the accident in the months that followed, the complexity of the situation has become a growing source of questions and concerns for the population living in the affected areas. As was also the case at Chernobyl, the daily confrontation with radioactivity, combined with the persistent distrust of the authorities have gradually generated a widespread feeling among the inhabitants of loss of control, exclusion and even abandonment.

The Chernobyl experience had indeed already shown that the involvement of residents, as well as local authorities and professionals in the rehabilitation process was a decisive factor in restoring confidence in oneself and in others, and at the same time ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of protective actions. It also had shown that the establishment of forums for dialogue is crucial to promote a shared vision of the problems and challenges the affected population is facing in contaminated areas and to promote cooperation between all stakeholders. It should be noted that these two lessons were emphasized as recommendations in ICRP Publication 111 on the protection of people living in long-term contaminated areas after a nuclear accident. (See Ref. 1).

Since autumn 2011, five dialogues have been held on topics as diverse as: the challenges of the Fukushima Prefecture and those of the city of Date, the management of contaminated products, children's education in the affected territories, and the difficult and painful questions “to return or not?” and “to stay or to leave?” (See Ref. 2). Through these dialogues, I could follow the considerable progress that has been made for more than two years. Beyond the conclusions drawn by the participants, I was also able to compare the two situations - Chernobyl and Fukushima - and also to judge the pertinence and robustness of the ICRP recommendations for post-accident management.

Some general conclusions have emerged from the dialogues. First, the importance of giving everyone in the affected areas the means to understand where, when and how they are exposed so that they can protect themselves and protect their loved ones effectively. The characterization of the radiological situation at the individual level is indeed the most effective lever for developing practical radiation protection culture and to promote self-help protection. For those wishing to stay in the territories it is also the best way to regain control of their own situation and that of their community. This characterization requires access to the means to measure external and internal exposures, but it also implies that the expertise in measurement be at the service of the expectations of individuals and communities. On another level, other strong conclusions emerged from the dialogues like the need to preserve

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traditions and local culture, to transmit the memory of the accident, and to strengthen solidarity between the people of Fukushima Prefecture and those of the rest of Japan and abroad. It is the dignity of people which is at stake at this level. But all this is only possible if further decisions are made and resources are mobilized to ensure the socio-economic development of the areas affected in the long-term. Finally, the dialogues have revealed that gradually people living in the affected areas have mobilized themselves with the support of local leaders and experts to serve their needs. Local initiatives have emerged in communities showing that individual will, coupled with cooperation between all local and national actors, are powerful factors in taming radioactivity and mastering exposures. Incidentally, these initiatives have also shown that the measured doses were much lower than the estimated doses, thus reinforcing the importance of developing the measurement of individual doses.

The dialogue has also revealed differences with Chernobyl in terms of consequence management, and of course on a technical level: a quarter of century is separating the two accidents and the technical contexts are quite different particularly with the omnipresent role of e-technology and social media. From these points of view, the modalities of the post-Fukushima accident management, and the organizational and technical considerations lead to important lessons that can strengthen the ICRP recommendations in this area. But the dialogues also showed that there were no significant differences between the general feelings and attitudes of the affected people in Fukushima and Chernobyl. Presentations of Belarusians and Norwegians who participated in dialogues are there to testify to this.

Like Chernobyl, the Fukushima experience demonstrates the importance of the human consequences of a nuclear accident on demographic, psychological, ethical and socio-economic levels. It teaches us that the rehabilitation of living conditions in the long term is not just a matter of science and technology. It is also a matter of respect for values such as prudence and equity in the management of radiation protection, and the fundamental values of dignity of those affected and solidarity with them.

To conclude, I would like to mention again the role of practical radiation protection culture that has emerged over the dialogues as a key element for the success of the rehabilitation process.

In May 2011, just two months after the accident, I was interviewed by a journalist from a major Japanese daily on the ICRP recommendations related to the protection of people after a nuclear accident. Having responded to her questions, I asked this young lady how she and her family had lived the accident and how she had reacted to the situation. I then realized that she knew almost nothing about radiation risk and how to protect oneself against it.

Then I thought for myself that it was a rather surprising position for someone who lived in a country that has experienced the tragic experience of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the case of the Lucky Dragon, which built fifty nuclear reactors, which is the champion of the number of medical scanners per million inhabitants and, in addition, has some of the best experts in radiation protection in the world.

However, the poor level of radiation protection culture in Japan, revealed by the Fukushima accident, is nothing exceptional. Throughout the world the situation is identical. Radioactivity remains for the vast majority of people a scary invisible threat. Incidentally, when facing this situation, is it not our duty, we radiation protection professionals, to ask ourselves what responsibility we bear in the fact that after more than a century of daily use of X-rays and radioactivity the population and the media are unable to judge the extent of the risk and ignore actions to protect themselves effectively if necessary?

(Ref.2) http://ethos-fukushima.blogspot.fr/p/icrp-dialogue.html

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From 1990 to 2010, he was involved in international projects on the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe and the rehabilitation of living conditions in the contaminated territories in Belarus.

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