

In the Compilation of a Research Report of the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease

On the occasion of submission of a research report on the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease to the National Institute for Minamata Disease, I feel deep emotion as the chairperson of the Study Group.

The objectives of the Study Group have been focused on the process of cause-effect investigation of Minamata disease and countermeasures against the disease, which would lead to the Government's announcement of its views on the disease. After the discovery of the strange disease, it took 12 years for the Government to decide on a unified policy toward the disease. Investigations of these circumstances, under which the delay of the policy decision had caused the spread of tragic consequences, including the second outbreak of Minamata disease in Niigata Prefecture, must have urged the Government's remorse, and induced severe controversy to every member of the Study Group as well, who has been involved in the Minamata disease affair from different standpoints.

The National Institute for Minamata Disease established the Study Group to undertake such a task. The Institute may meet with some criticisms that the start was too late, because 40 years or more have already passed since the official discovery of Minamata disease. Until September 1995, when the political solution presented by the Government to the problem of Minamata disease was accepted by patient groups and disputes about exploration of the responsibility of the Government were settled, we had not expected any national research institute to have discussed "learnings" among the investigators in quite different standpoints. Although the legal action to the Kansai district court, which did not yet accept the political solution to the problem, is pending in court, the matter is settled at present from a political standpoint. In Minamata "*moyai-naoshi* (restoration of mooring)" was advocated. Under these circumstances, matters were likely to develop socially toward the reconciliation.

In the first meeting of the Study Group, it was decided that I took charge of the chairpersonship. Even if the problem had been politically settled, I had entertained some apprehensions about the possibility of a definite conclusion being drawn among the members who had participated in from such various standpoints, when looking at lineup of the Study Group members. However, it became increasingly clear that the apprehensions were utterly unfounded.

The secretariat was asked to arrange those opinions offered from every member in each meeting, to make drafts of subject matters, which would be presented for further discussion, and to collect the reference data concerned. The secretariat prepared subject matters faithfully to the members' opinions, and did not set up any means of control for discussion. In the beginning, there were some requests that the research report be compiled within one year. In this matter as well, the long argument about the problem was prior to the quick compilation.

From respective standpoints, the affair was much debated on the basis of each member's own experiences, and occasionally the facts with which the persons dealt in the draft had unpleasant experience were also revealed.

Severe opinions against the governments and companies as well were offered.

When the issue gradually boiled down at each time of the meeting of the Study Group, however, common understandings came to be obtained among the members who appeared to have participated in the Study Group from different standpoints, and the work to induce “learnings” from these understandings progressed satisfactorily. Ultimately, the research report thus-compiled had few or no parts, in which both pros and cons of the issues were offered and personal views were included without any change.

I would like to pay my respects to all the members for their having participated in and cooperated with the progression of the difficult task from a broader perspective with the aim of avoiding the error of Minamata disease to be repeated. I also express my thanks to the secretariat, who have made exhaustive efforts, as the chairperson of the Study Group.

Michio Hashimoto
Chairperson
the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease
1999 Dec.

List of members of the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease

Asano, Naoto: *Prof. of the Faculty of Law, Fukuoka University*

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The secretariat of the Study Group

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Editing of the English version

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The Meetings of the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease

1st meeting	July 5, 1997
2nd meeting	November 24, 1997
3rd meeting	February 22, 1998
4th meeting	April 18, 1998
5th meeting	May 8-9, 1998
6th meeting	July 19-20, 1998
7th meeting	October 31-November 1, 1998
8th meeting	March 21-22, 1999
9th meeting	June 26-27, 1999
10th meeting	September 5-6, 1999
11th meeting	December 4, 1999

On the Research Report of the Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease

The Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease was established as a research project of the National Institute for Minamata Disease (NIMD) in July 1997 on the basis of the purport of “a talk by the Prime Minister in the solution of the problem with Minamata disease”, which was decided upon by the Cabinet in case of the political settlement of Minamata disease in 1995.

Herein, the circumstances of the occurrence of a tragedy of Minamata disease, particularly of the spread of casualties of Minamata disease, are compiled and discussed from a social scientific viewpoint with reference mainly to approach of each party of the Government, companies, research institutions, victims, and so on. The research report was designed to deduce learnings, the most of which could be put to practical use for policy decisions by the Government not only of Japan but also of various foreign countries and for companies’ measures taken against environmental pollution.

The Social Scientific Study Group on Minamata Disease defined the period dealt with by the study group as that from May, 1956, when the Minamata disease was officially discovered, to September, 1968, when the Government’s unified views were lead. In April 1997, NIMD started selecting suitable persons for members of the Study Group from physicians and investigators, who had been involved with the treatment and studies in the early stage after the discovery of Minamata disease, investigators who had long studied the problem of Minamata disease, investigators of environmental problems in modern times, and so on.

Consents to the registration as the members were obtained from 10 persons. On July 5, 1997, the 1st meeting was held in Kumamoto City, and it was decided there that Mr. Michio Hashimoto would take charge of the Chairperson of the Study Group.

The Social Sciences Section of Department of International Affairs and Environmental Sciences of NIMD took charge of the Secretariat of the Study Group. The Secretariat started compiling with the aim at making research report under the guidance of the Chairperson Hashimoto. The work began with a clean slate; i.e., the selection of important circumstances and facts, establishment of points of discussion, and so on were conducted first.

The opinions offered from every member in each meeting were arranged to make drafts of subject matters, which would be presented for further discussion. The number of the items that should be assessed gradually increased, and the long argument over two days was adopted from the 5th meeting (May 8-9, 1998) onward.

Extraction of concrete learnings started from the 6th meeting (July 19-20, 1998). Thereafter, assessment of the details of expression was repeated for all sentences on at least 100 pages, while new facts and discussion were added. In this way, the research report was completed.

With regard to the courses and evaluation of the facts the documents kept and verbal evidence were confirmed to ensure the accuracy of these documents and evidence. However, it is thought that there are important facts, which are still interpreted erroneously or not yet be mentioned. Therefore, the matters written in the report does not show the final conclusion. They are waiting the verdict of a number of people.

In conclusion, I express my thanks to all the members as well as the Chairperson, who have long lavished much time and labor on debating at meetings and making the research report on the Study Group, though they

were very busy.

Yukio Takizawa
Director of the National Institute for Minamata Disease,
Environment Agency
1999 Dec.

Reference

*The Statement of Prime Minister on Solving the Problem with Minamata Disease
(tentative translation)*

Decided at the cabinet meeting on December 15, 1995

With regard to the problem with Minamata disease that should be regarded as the origin of environmental pollution, the parties concerned reached an agreement to settle the problem owing to the efforts of many people, and it could be solved 40 years after the first outbreak of the disease.

Apart from the compensation problem of patients certified under the Law Concerning Compensation and Prevention of Pollution-related Health Damage, which have already been solved, some problems still remain to be solved with the relief of the people who have not been able to be certified as the patient.

In order to solve the problem early, I have made efforts in all sincerity while closely communicating working with ruling coalition parties and local governments concerned. I would like to present my heartfelt admiration for the efforts of the people concerned including those who belong to each sufferers' group at reaching a difficult decision after the long and hard history.

In the solution of the problem, I express my feelings of profound mourning for the people who died with agony and resentment. When I think of incurable feelings of many people, who have long been forced to have agony that is beyond description, I do not know how to apologize to them.

The problem with Minamata disease not only induced serious damages to health but also destroyed ties among the local residents, having had huge and wide-ranging influence on the local communities.

I heartily hope that with the solution as a momentum the people of the districts concerned about Minamata disease will rebuild their local communities, where they will live together in mentally comfortable as early as possible.

Retrospectively considering the process from the outbreak up to the present time, the Government made efforts as much as possible at each time. However, we must reflect honestly that it eventually took long time to acknowledge the cause of Minamata disease and to take appropriate approaches to companies, and also that outbreak of the second Minamata Disease occurred in Niigata. I make a fresh determination that such a misery environmental pollution should not be repeated.

On solving this problem, the Government will promote countermeasures in cooperation with local governments concerning the medical program of Comprehensive Measures of Minamata Disease, financial support to Chisso Corporation, rehabilitation and advancement of the-affected regions, etc. We must modestly learn from the tragedy of Minamata disease. We determined to advance the environmental policy in Japan, and to make international contribution through cooperating actively with foreign countries over the world by putting our experiences and technologies to practical use.