

When the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes struck, we had no idea what we were living through, only that we were terrified. We were international residents of Kumamoto, shaken and disoriented, with no disaster training, no way to understand the information being broadcast on TV and radio, and no clear sense of what would happen next. Out of that experience, the Kumamoto Earthquake Experience Project (KEEP) was born.

With the help of Shinya Ueno sensei at Kumamoto University, we organised our first event: a workshop held at Parea in Kumamoto City on the 26th July 2016. Around forty people attended, a mix of Japanese and international residents. We used a world-café format, with each person sharing their experience for a few minutes before everybody switched tables to speak with new people.

The most surprising thing we discovered was that Japanese residents felt the same fears we did. We had assumed Japanese people would all be prepared for disasters and not see them as something to worry about, but when one struck Kumamoto it turned out we were all the same: terrified at the strength of nature and its ability to turn our lives upside down. The Japanese participants were equally surprised by our stories; they hadn't considered how hard it must have been to experience a disaster in a foreign country, with no training on what to do and unable to understand the information available.

Everyone who attended spoke about how much they valued it; how sharing their experiences lifted a weight from them, and how reassuring it was to discover that others had felt the same way. From that event, KEEP's first message took shape: *Let's KEEP together. We are all residents of Kumamoto, whatever our origins, and we all wanted to play our part in Kumamoto's recovery.*

We spoke to the media after the event and with Hiromitsu Yagi at Kumamoto International Foundation, who invited us to meet researchers and speak with visitors from outside Kumamoto at the international center. As well as these activities, in our first year we interviewed many people about their experiences, including representatives of organisations like the Kumamoto Islamic Center, and conducted focus groups to understand the broader issues foreign residents had faced. We found that difficulties were often linked to Japanese language ability and whether a person had a large international community to rely on. We also attended an event by CLAIR — the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations — in Tokyo and a disaster event held in Kobe with survivors of the 1995 earthquake to speak about KEEP's activities and share our knowledge, a sign that what we had learned in Kumamoto was already being recognised as relevant far beyond it.

We came to the first anniversary of the earthquakes with a booklet published with support from a Kumamoto University award and held an event where international

students from Kobe came to hear about our experiences. We thought this would be the culmination of KEEP's activities. It turned out KEEP was only just getting started.

In the years that followed, KEEP took its message across Japan. We visited Tokyo and Kobe again to speak at further events. We spoke at universities in Saga, Kagoshima, and eventually Sophia University in Tokyo, each time reaching new audiences who had never considered the foreign resident perspective on disaster. In a presentation in Miyazaki we discussed not only what foreign residents experience during earthquakes but how they can actively contribute to relief efforts: a shift in understanding foreign residents as not only victims but sources of help, and a viewpoint that has become increasingly important to us. We appeared on NHK Kumamoto radio, and when the pandemic forced us online, we continued through Zoom panels and Skype presentations, connecting with communities as far away as Hokkaido who were still dealing with the aftermath of their own 2018 earthquake.

From 2022, our work took on a more practical dimension. Through a JICA pilot programme, we worked alongside leaders from the Nepali, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Islamic communities to build real connections between foreign residents and disaster relief organisations across Kumamoto Prefecture. We held Easy English workshops in Fukuoka and Kumamoto for Japanese volunteers who would work at evacuation shelters in the event of a disaster, giving them tools to communicate across language barriers when it matters most. We visited Misato Town in south Kumamoto to deliver disaster safety information directly to Myanmar residents. And we continued to advise researchers from across Japan on the realities of life for international residents in the aftermath of the Kumamoto earthquakes and what measures we believed were necessary to build disaster resilient communities elsewhere.

We have now presented to Waseda University students visiting Kumamoto four years running, helped train new Kumamoto City Hall employees by helping them understand the lack of knowledge of Japanese procedures newcomers have compared to Japanese residents, and spoken at the national Bousai Kokutai disaster prevention conference held in Kumamoto in 2024. In January 2026, a Kumamoto prefectural government training event brought together foreign residents from ten different countries for hands-on disaster preparation. In March, we delivered a keynote at the 13th Global Work Camp at the National Aso Youth Friendship Center, exploring how preparedness can bring communities together. We also took part in an interview with an international resident from Djibouti, exploring whether Japan's disaster resilience techniques might apply in the Horn of Africa.

When the Noto Peninsula earthquakes struck two years ago, many foreign residents faced the same problems we had in 2016: no disaster training, no knowledge of evacuation shelters, no idea what to do. This is why KEEP's work remains important, not

because Kumamoto's experience is special, but because it is a lesson others can learn from.

KEEP also appears frequently in the media. These appearances help international residents understand the importance of disaster preparation, while showing Japanese residents how they can support newcomers through simple English, easy Japanese, or even just smiles and gestures. In August 2024, KEEP featured on international news, both on NHK World and the BBC, discussing measures KEEP was taking to help raise awareness in the international community in Kumamoto about the risks of an incoming typhoon. Such initiatives help spread awareness of disaster prevention and we hope that such exposure to our activities will help people take the necessary steps to protect not only their own lives but those of their loved ones and community members too.

KEEP's activities have also been presented internationally, most recently at the International Sociological Association 5th Forum in Rabat, Morocco. Perhaps our proudest moment came when an Indonesian student from Keio University, who had attended one of our talks, told us he was taking KEEP's second message back to his country: *You can't predict, you can't prevent, but you can prepare.*

That international reach was never something we imagined when forty people gathered at Parea in July 2016. But if our activities mean one more person prepares, one more community connects, one more life is saved, then KEEP has done its job.