

Minamata in Global Environmental Issues

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For its magnitude of suffering, Minamata disease has been the worst case of environmental pollution in human history. Have we examined the problem thoroughly enough?

Our responsibility as social scientists is to study the history of Minamata more to contribute to the promotion of global environmental protection. Because the lessons from Minamata's case have not been studied enough, Minamata citizens could not figure out how they should unite to solve the problem together.

Unfortunately, there have been serious conflicts between victims of the disease and other residents. In Minamata, where a big company was employing more than four thousand workers at its peak, one half of the labor force of the region was suspected of causing pollution. Victims were accused of trying to force out the big company from the region and threaten the livelihood of the residents. As a result, citizens were reluctant to cooperate with the protest of patients and the lawsuits of victims against the company. Minamata's tragedy has been aggravated by residents' attitude of indifference to the sufferers.

The court decision to compensate the victims for damages adopted the PPP principle, resulting in a large amount of compensation. Burden to the company was so huge that Minamata citizens were afraid the company might go bankrupt and leave the region. Most banks had already started to withdraw money from transactions with Chisso, and when Chisso delisted from the stock exchange market because of its accumulated deficits, the central government had to ask the Kumamoto prefecture to give a 30-year loan to Chisso.

More than 30 years after the detection of victims, local government and citizens began to restore the regional environment as well as to find how to unite with patients to establish the global environmental city in Minamata.

Statistical Data

- * Number of recognized victims: 2255 (about half are alive); still in lawsuit, about 2000. (Number of dead owing to suffering is difficult to determine; in 1960 it was reported as 52.)
- * Chisso's cost for compensation and other obligations: 150 billion ¥ (\$1.43 billion).