

**2019 ASAKAWA Kan'ichi Award**  
**Student Paper Contest for International Understanding and Exchange**  
**High School / Highest Award**

## **Communicating and Connecting**

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After the Great East Japan Earthquake, a variety of support activities have been taking place for revitalizing regions of Fukushima. Thanks to such activities, Fukushima is stepping forward toward a new future. In terms of reputational damage to Fukushima Prefecture, we have continued to disseminate accurate information and gradually eradicated groundless prejudice. Consequently, we are steadily gaining a better understanding of Fukushima.

As the opening of the Tokyo Olympic Games is coming closer, we have begun to often hear the phrase, "Revitalization of Fukushima". It is an honor that Fukushima was selected as a starting point of the Torch Relay for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Some people may have a positive image with the word, "Revitalization", but I am afraid that people who do not know much about the actual situation here may be filled up with images of the aftermath of the disaster. Now that 8 years have passed, I hope people conceive a new Fukushima as a place suitable for a festival of peace. For that, people living in Fukushima have to deliver the current status to the rest of the world. In order to avoid prevailing of diverse images of revitalization possessed by each person over the real Fukushima, I think that "communicating and connecting" aspirations is what is needed right now.

I have participated in the Junior High School Leaders Summit Fukushima and discussed disaster experiences and challenges that Fukushima has to face with junior high school students from other prefectures. During the workshop, we shared our ideas in groups and made presentations. I can make use of that experience now. Among others, it was really an invaluable experience because junior high school students from other prefectures listened to my presentation on the disaster so seriously and thought about challenges of Fukushima so positively that I was able to feel how important it is

to communicate and connect with others. Now I am a high school student, and often participate in volunteer activities for organizing the Leaders Summit as well as international exchange activities with Brunei.

Exchange between Brunei and Fukushima started from the “See You Soon” project of the Japan-ASEAN Youth International Exchange Promotion Organization in which high school students from 5 high schools in Fukushima are participating. In fact, there are some students who were hesitant to take part in it due to a lack of cultural understanding about Brunei, and the image of Islam. I thought such mind is similar to prejudice of people who do not know much about Fukushima. It was a country completely unknown to me, so I did a search of its geographical position, economic condition with their natural resources of oil, and connections with Japan on the Internet before joining the exchange event.

What I learned when talking with local people there through video calls and exchanging letters is that the actual situation is quite different from the information that I gained on the Internet. When I first talked with them, I was frightened just to hear the word, Islam. However, as I went on talking with them, I learned that they are working on activities to accumulate goodwill by collecting donations and such while observing a fast, and that women wear Hijab on head, not because they are forced to do that but because they are too shy to show their hair. I was ashamed at myself for my ignorance about other people’s religion and way of thinking.

Now, I communicate with them on social media about school life and such, and can talk with them as freely as Japanese friends about music and soccer which are common topics. Through communication, I was able to learn about the life style of Islam which is a different culture and students’ way of thinking there. Accordingly, I now think that they are not so different from me. In a society where information from television or the internet is flowing unchecked, you are likely to regard people in other countries with prejudice or preconceptions. That is why connecting people closer and more earnestly is needed in the contemporary society.

Although it is just a beginning of the exchange with Brunei, local newspapers in Fukushima covered its story, and people started to get interested in Brunei. Then, one day there was a phone call of an inquiry to our school. That was a request to look for a Bruneian man. About 30 years ago, Iitate Village, Fukushima Prefecture initiated

Japan-ASEAN exchange program when Brunei Darussalam declared its independence. A couple living in Iitate Village provided homestay for a Bruneian boy at that time. They exchanged letters with him for years after he returned home. However, communication was disrupted due to the disaster. They have been concerned about him for a long time. They knew his then address and name, but could not get in touch with him. They asked us to look for the man when they read an article of the exchange program with Brunei in the newspaper.

It was the first time for me to know that a couple in Iitate Village used to exchange with a Bruneian boy. Several years on since the people of Iitate Village evacuated their homes. They talked about their story saying, "We can think about reorganizing our life now. We do not want to keep caring about memories of Iitate Village". When I heard about it, I wanted to help them in any way. Promptly, with the cooperation of Japan-ASEAN, I started to do some research on materials and photographs related to the exchange between Japan and ASEAN at that time. In order to connect the exchange that took place 30 years ago with the present time, other high school students are cooperating with me.

Observing the friendship across time and borders, I feel the meaning of consideration for others and connecting with people having different culture and value judgment. If we accumulate experiences of "communicating and connecting" with the exchange with Brunei, we can pave the way little by little toward a world without prejudice and discrimination. By making use of this experience, I want to become a person who can act globally for the future of Fukushima and Japan.