Since October 2011, the Red Apron Project is Ajinomoto Group’s ongoing initiative to support reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Cooking classes held at temporary housing assembly halls and other activities are conducted in the three prefectures of Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima, in collaboration with local governments, social welfare councils, diet improvement promotion councils, NPOs, universities, and temporary housing community councils.

Project beginnings
In July 2011, Ajinomoto Co., Inc. appointed a dedicated project supervisor to work in the disaster-stricken areas. The region’s food and nutrition issues were brought out by interviews with officials from local governments, social welfare councils, universities, and NPOs, among others. One issue was the emerging health problems caused by unbalanced diets, which was partially due to people tending to cook less in the temporary housing’s small kitchens. In the new communities formed by the temporary housing, social interactions between residents were also weak, and many of the elderly tended to feel isolated and withdraw from others.

The Ajinomoto Group devised a plan to help with the local resident’s nutritional problems, as well as help build new communities, by “cooking together and eating together” well-balanced meals.

Mobile cooking classes started in October 2011 organized by the local governments, social welfare councils, diet improvement promotion councils, NPOs, universities, and temporary housing community councils, with the Group providing expertise such as nutritious recipes, the mobile kitchen, and other equipment.

Partner-led collaborative activities
1. Make cooking groups participatory
One aim of this project is to connect participants through cooking to help rebuild communities. The experience of cooking together is just as important as eating together in deepening relationships. And for the Tohoku region where salt intake is high, low salt menus are provided to aid in maintaining health.

2. Make collaborative partners the organizers of the cooking class
This strategy was taken so that by providing the gathering place and guiding people, the people helping with the community’s social problems, such as local governments, NPOs, social welfare councils, diet improvement promotion councils, and temporary housing community councils, form stronger bonds with the local people. In contrast, with a single corporate organizer, the initiative may turn into a one-off event that is difficult to sustain. These people helping with the community’s social problems are designated as “collaborative partners.”

3. Make collaborative partners decide on the theme of the cooking class
The themes of the cooking classes in the project vary according to each area’s challenges. If social withdrawal of men is a serious issue, for example, then a cooking class for men is held. The collaborative partners decide on such themes, since they know more than anybody else the issues facing each area and can carry out the activities in consultation with the community.
Project achievements

1. Human connections
Through this project, the Ajinomoto Group was able to meet the people in social welfare councils and diet improvement promotion councils. These people have been working closely with the community on social and nutritional issues since before the earthquake. By meeting them through the project, the Group has learned about the social issues in each community and what the Group can do to help with these issues.

One of the lessons learned is that corporate contribution to society does not necessarily have to be money or goods. Rather, corporations need to consider the social issues at the community level from such people’s perspective, before suggesting solutions that leverage the core business and expertise of the company.

For Ajinomoto Group, this translates to food and nutrition, which led to the proposal of a mobile cooking class—the heart of this project.

2. Learning opportunity for employees
For Group employees donating their time as volunteers, supporting the affected areas through food and nutrition is a source of renewed pride as a member of the Ajinomoto Group.

Many of those who volunteered said that they experienced first-hand how food is the basis of life. Researchers, finance department staff and other employees who usually do not have the chance to interact with consumers also said, “Hearing words of gratitude from the people in affected areas made me think about my own purpose as a member of a food company.”

The project is a great opportunity for employees to experience Ajinomoto Group’s mission to “contribute to the world’s food and wellness, and to better lives for the future.”

3. Sharing expertise by publishing book
The project published a book titled “Fukko-Gohan (food during the reconstruction period)” in May 2016 through SHOGAKUKAN Inc. The book conveys the restorative “power of food” in this period of recovery from the disaster, through the voices of people in Tohoku who worked together with the Group as collaborative partners.

Outlook for the future

The Ajinomoto group has declared its intention to continue the project until the temporary housings are gone and the path to recovery is clear.

Now that reconstruction is slowly moving forward, people in Tohoku are moving from temporary housing to public housing for disaster-affected people. Again, issues regarding relationships between people in the new communities are starting to emerge.

Once more, the project is proposing to face this issue by “cooking together and eating together” through mobile cooking classes.
Support for Areas Struck by Natural Disaster

TOPOCS

Report on reconstruction support initiatives and activities co-creating value with each area

In July 21, 2016, Takaaki Nishii, the CEO of Ajinomoto Co., Inc., visited the prefectural offices of Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate to report on Ajinomoto Group’s activities supporting Tohoku. He also informed them of the donation to prefectural libraries of the book “Fukko-Gohan (food during the reconstruction period)” edited by Ajinomoto Group’s Red Apron Project, which showcases the power of food.

At Fukushima Prefecture, the CEO Nishii said, “I just participated in the health and nutrition seminar (cooking class) of the Red Apron Project at Koori Town in Fukushima Prefecture. The class became lively as soon as the cooking starts, and by the time everyone ate, the participants were talking freely to each other. The strength of food to make bonds always makes me wonder.” This was the fifth time he had participated in this initiative. Governor Masao Uchibori of Fukushima showed his appreciation by saying, “There is nothing better than food to revive the spirit. Cooking and dining together is one of life’s basic happiness.”

In Miyagi Prefecture, the CEO Nishi reported on activities supporting the recovery of fisheries in collaboration with communities on “Miyagi fishery products day” promoted by the Miyagi Prefectural Government. In Iwate Prefecture, he reported on initiatives such as reducing salt intake on “Low/proper salt day in Iwate” together with the communities.

From the Red Apron Project to the business activities conducted by local Ajinomoto branches, the heads of local governments have deepened understanding and strengthened further cooperation for Group initiatives that promote ASV and co-create value together with society and communities.

Revitalization of industries through marketing, sales and CSR collaboration

As a result of steady efforts on a daily basis by the Red Apron Project, the Ajinomoto Group has earned the trust of its local partners including the government. This trust is transforming into the development of a new business model “solving local issues through core business” in partnership with government.

For example, under the common goal of helping the recovery of Miyagi Prefecture fishing industries with the Miyagi Prefectural Government, the Group had success in the collaborative sales promotion of Miyagi seafood products and Ajinomoto products in retail stores (supporting “local consumption of local production” within Miyagi Prefecture), and in offering menus using Miyagi seafood and Ajinomoto products in office lunches (supporting “outside consumption of local production” in Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture).

The Group will continue to explore ways of collaborating and to support Tohoku reconstruction through the revitalization of its industries using the Group’s core business.