

Research Note

NGOS AND CITIZEN EDUCATION IN JAPAN*
A Research Note

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As the twenty-first century approaches, many concerns have been expressed about the state of societies being torn, on one hand by homogenizing forces of mass-marketing and global communications, while on the other hand by sometimes virulent movements for sectionalism and differentiation (Barber, 1992). To counter the negative effects of both extremes, a strengthening of "civil society" has been recommended by many observers (ex : Ohta, 1995 ; Otto, 1996). Civil society exists between government and the economy to moderate the individual's interactions with both entities. It is necessary to prevent alienation as faceless institutions encroach upon our daily lives. Not only has there been interest in developing civil societies in new democracies just beginning their experience with citizen participation, there has been a vigorous discussion of the need to energize community participation within the older liberal democracies (Putnam, 1994).

Another topic of recent debate is the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in creating a more representative global community by encouraging formalized interaction between those groups and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs) (Alger, 1996 ; Schweitz, 1996). The argument here is that as nation states and their clubs, the IGOs, are not addressing the issues of concern to many NGOs, nor are they necessarily welcoming to grassroots participation, there is a vacuum to be filled by the many NGOs which have an international agenda. The question now has become how to manage these numerous new voices that are vying for attention in international fora. How can we ensure that the interests of as many people as possible, not just the richest or the best organized, will be represented by the interactions between IGOs and NGOs? How can NGOs be given a meaningful role in international decision making when they vary so much in ideology, membership, and tactics used to influence various centers of power? Once given access to decision making opportunities, how can NGOs be held accountable for their roles in producing and implementing various policies (Schweitz, 1996, p. 14)?

The two issues I have just introduced, first of reinvigorating civil society and secondly, of legitimizing the role of NGOs in international policy making, have a common concern ; mobilizing, or raising the consciousness of as many people as possible to participate in decision making world wide. Each country has a different set of circumstances which require different strategies for mobilizing NGO support. Extremely impoverished and undereducated populations have motivations which may vary significantly from those of affluent means, so there must be sensitivity on the part of NGO leaders to broadcast their messages in ways that appeal to their target audience. Already, coalitions of many Asian NGOs are actively involved in public education and lobbying (Riker, 1995, p193). In fact, one important role of some NGOs is to organize educational materials and opportunities to assist other NGO representatives to collaborate when appropriate, and to take advantage of international agencies (Smith, 1998, p. 21).

Rather than examine the range of tactics used by NGOs around the world to elicit support from varying groups, I will focus here on the efforts of Japanese non-profit organizations to increase public awareness about their particular issues, and to invite active participation in the efforts of the groups. After explaining the reason for my choice of Japan , I will examine some of the educational rationales and strategies employed by Japanese NGOs.

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NGOs in Japan

Although Japan is stereotyped as a collectivist society where the group has precedence over the individual, these group tendencies do not necessarily promote equal participation or responsibility in decision-making. While civil society may be assumed to be nurtured by Japanese proclivities for association, the reality may be that groups offer comfortable refuges from individual responsibility and ethical decision making (Bellah, 1995 a). In fact, the numbers of public interest groups in Japan are fewer, and their strength is far less than in Western countries. Japanese NGOs, which I define as non-profit, public interest groups, may suffer from the same internal dynamics of other organizations within Japanese society, but Ohta (1995) argues that the primary reason for the under development of Japan's "third sector" (after business and government), is the legal system which favors government oversight and onerous regulations for public interest groups. Not only is it very difficult for an organization to receive non-profit status in Japan, individual contributors are treated less favorably than large corporate donors in receiving tax benefits. Nevertheless, there appears to be a broad interest in contributing even to international charitable causes, judging from the experience of the "International Voluntary Savings" program (Ohta, 1995, p. 228). Just in the period between January 1991 when it was initiated, and July 1994, this program which allowed people with post-office savings accounts to donate 20 percent of their interest to private international assistance projects attracted 15 million participants, and generated ¥8.7 billion (around US\$87 million).

Because of Japan's great economic power, and because of international expectations that such a wealthy nation needs to take more of an initiative in addressing world problems, there is pressure on the Japanese government and on the people as a whole to reach out beyond their shores. In the 1997 fiscal year, the government has decreased the amount of Official Development Assistance, but with the largest foreign aid budget in the world, questions remain about the appropriateness of projects supported by these funds. At the same time, there has been a growth in Japanese NGOs involved in development issues. Some of them provide training for people from a variety of countries, while others fund projects which build schools, dig wells, or provide other basic amenities in impoverished communities. Of course Japanese NGOs are not only focused on international issues. There are growing numbers of groups involved in environmental, agricultural, and social welfare matters at home.

Now for the central question of this paper : If Japanese NGOs suffer from unique cultural and legal impediments, how are they attempting to overcome their disadvantages and promote their interests? The assumption is that by involving larger numbers of members in their activities and decision making, the NGOs can serve to nurture the kind of civil society which supports participatory government.

Educational Efforts of NGOs

Although I have mentioned some of the work of Japanese NGOs as involving training for people from other countries, the education I am referring to here is the awareness building within Japan itself. Without efforts to sensitize the public about both international and domestic problems, group membership would not grow, and more broadly, civic involvement would not improve. As noted by Robert Bellah (1995b) in comments about Japan and the U. S.,

Political leaders will only respond to an aroused citizenry, and an aroused citizenry is an educated citizenry. So it is the responsibility of intellectual, cultural, religious, and community leaders in both countries to foster a new understanding of the world and the place of our respective nations in it (p. 121).

But what kind of understanding is being promoted by leaders of Japanese NGOs? Almost all of the organizations dealing with Southeast Asia described by Wurfel (1996) claim to be improving relations between Japan and the region it ravaged during the Second World War. However, there is considerable variation in the

messages projected by these NGOs. For example, one medium-sized NGO provides scholarships for an orphanage and school in Thailand, certainly commendable projects, but according to Wurfel (p. 15), the amount of contributions required from each donor is so small, and the promotion materials emphasize a continuation of the dependent relationship, that very little understanding of partnership between Japanese and Thais is projected. In fact, the experience does little to change existing attitudes of superiority, and many of the Japanese donors complain that they do not receive thank-you letters from their scholarship recipients.

One of the most popular educational tools of NGOs involved in Southeast Asia is the "exposure tour" (pp. 16, 17) in which Japanese donors or volunteers are taken on a trip to the location where organization funds are being used. Among the hundreds of such tours being taken each year are those which profoundly impress the participants, and propel them into further activism on behalf of people in need. However, there are tours which are no more than excuses for tourism or which are self-congratulatory by showing how noble the contributors have been to fund a new school building or a new well. The most effective trips are those which allow the Japanese traveler to assist with a project on site, and work closely with the local people who will use the facility.

Some of the NGOs have the express goal of addressing wounds from the war. For those groups, it is important to supplement the limited information most Japanese receive in their schools about their country's activities in Asia. Although such exposure tours may not necessarily be the most pleasant for Japanese participants, they generally have sought the experience because they do want to learn about what happened. Many current NGO leaders were first compelled to choose a life of activism because of the profound impression they received from exposure tours (p. 18).

Another important education tool used by the majority of Japanese NGOs is the newsletter. Of course newsletters go primarily to current members, but they are an effective way of increasing consciousness about a variety of issues. NGO newsletters also find their way to public access areas such as libraries and schools where they can be used as resources. The newsletter produced by the Asian Health Institute (AHI), an NGO which trains Asian health workers, has both an English and Japanese edition, and topics such as feminism and the environment are featured in each issue. One recent newsletter had a profile of an AHI supporter who was a city council woman, showing how international concerns are linked with concern for domestic issues as well (Nisshin City women in action, 1996). Several NGO coordinating bodies receive newsletters from many organizations, and make them available to those who wish to learn about the groups in general, or about a particular type of group activity.

Somewhat related to the newsletters are media coverage of NGO activities. Of course not all media exposure is initiated by the groups themselves, but if the message is positive, they can increase membership and general awareness about group activities. Overall, media coverage of political issues has improved Japanese public awareness and level of participation (Flanagan, 1996) so the frequent newspaper articles and television news spots on NGO activities cannot avoid making an impact on the average citizen. Some NGOs that have close ties with the government make the most of media coverage, and stage ceremonies which enhance their image as respectable civic groups (Wurfel, 1996, pp. 13, 14), but which blur their identities as nongovernmental entities.

Conclusion

Because this paper is just a brief summary of NGO educational efforts, it is difficult to arrive at any major conclusion. However, the need for more research and data is certain. Presently there is very little information summarizing group activities, and particularly, group budget breakdowns. Although the Japanese NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC) produces an NGO yearbook, it is not available in English, and does not have the kind of detail which would be helpful in making comparisons, or in drawing general conclusions about educational activities. Instead, one must rely on the newsletters from individual groups, which vary considerably in content.

The importance of public education would seem obvious to organizations which rely on contributions and

voluntary labor to some extent, but how far they go beyond self-promotion is a subjective assessment. Even semi-commercial organizations such as the Co-ops in Japan have regular publicity for social welfare (workshops for the disabled), environmental (recycling projects), and international assistance (UNICEF) programs they support, ensuring that hundreds of thousands of people are exposed to the need for such participation by average citizens.

Whether education efforts by NGOs have any relation to civil society in Japan cannot be assessed conclusively, but the growing success of Japanese volunteer groups demonstrate that there is interest in contributing to the greater community. The fact that a growing number of volunteer groups is involved in international activities means that attention is being drawn from the local, immediate concerns to more global issues. An excellent example of such a transition is the recent newspaper notice requesting funds for victims of the November 6th cyclone in India (Funds sought, 1996). Perhaps such an appeal would not be so unusual except that it was issued by the "NGOs Coordinating Team for Hanshin Quake Relief," a very locally focused group. Now that more than three years have passed since the Hanshin earthquake, related needs continue, but sensitivity to others' plights appears to have been established. Civil society need not focus on international issues, but when neighbors can work together to assist people on the other side of the globe, there is more of a sense of civic virtue rather than self-interest.

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ABSTRACT

The impact of NGOs is expanding, both in domestic and international politics. It is a rare regime that can completely ignore the petitions of well-organized non-governmental organizations. Just as the issues which motivate NGOs are very diverse, the tactics and goals of these organizations can vary among them as well. Some NGOs focus directly on influencing government officials to adopt policies favorable to the groups' causes. Others support private efforts to accomplish humanitarian or religious goals. In this paper, I explore yet another thrust of NGOs; their work to educate the public. Although citizen education by some NGOs may be an inadvertent side-effect of their primary activities, other groups emphasize this method to raise both financial and indirect political support. Some go so far as to provide materials for use by students and adults, but the objective is to raise consciousness and to urge participation in the organization's goals.