

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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