

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