

Japan's NGOs and International Cooperation

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Introduction – The Role of Japan's NGOs Today

Today, more than half a century after the end of World War II, we still face many challenges of a global scale. When the conflict between the East and the West ended in the 1990s, hopes arose that the focus would turn towards individuals and that real global efforts towards the elimination of poverty and disparities between peoples could begin. Since then, however, ethnic disputes and conflicts in various regions of the world have in fact intensified. Attempts at self-justification through high-handed tactics such as “direct violence” and “war”, far from promoting “peace”, have only invited a quagmire of prolonged conflict, which poses a constant threat to people's very lives.

Since the 1960s, as one looks back, the so-called industrial states such as European countries, the United States and Japan, began a rush of international cooperation efforts in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA), as they endeavored to solve the various problems of the global community. Unfortunately, however, more than 40 years later, the situation of the world's six billion people has become even worse. Poverty has worsened and the disparities between people have grown wider, with children unable to obtain even a basic elementary education, the problem of child labor, health issues such as infant mortality rates and HIV/AIDS and the rapid expansion of the destruction of the global environment; the list is endless. Now, as we enter the 21st Century, there still seems to be no end to the sources of war and conflict. It is a time when national governments should take the lead and step up their international cooperation efforts, but instead, they are too preoccupied with the deteriorating political and economic situations in their own

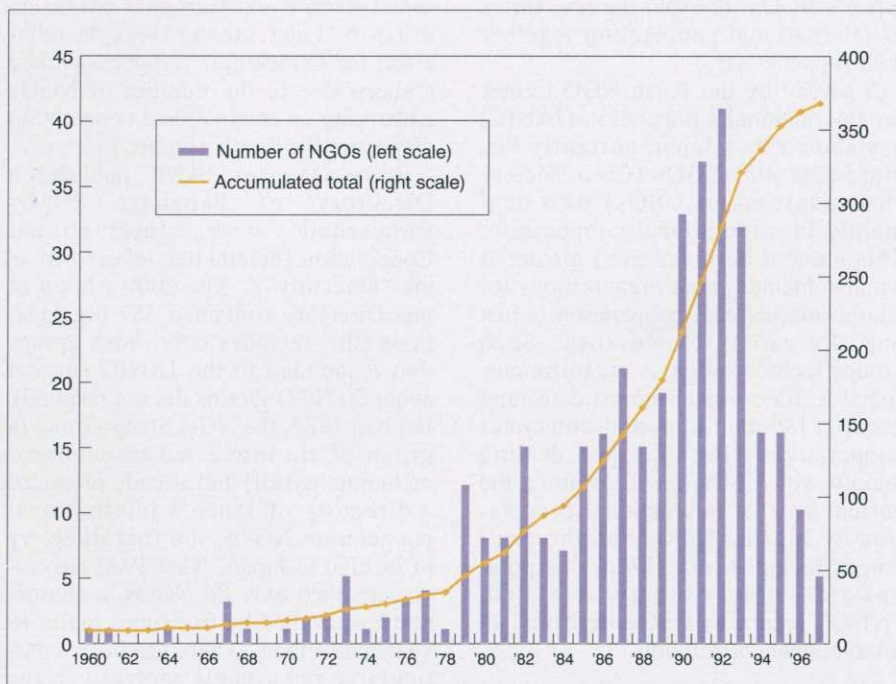
countries. For governments to continue to spend large amounts of money in the pursuit of international cooperation, it is naturally imperative that they have broad support from the public.

Under these circumstances, Japan's role in the international community is being called into question. Strong advocacy for international cooperation with the participation of citizens has finally emerged in Japan in recent years, and there is a growing emphasis on the importance of international cooperation at all levels of society. As well as local governments, the role of NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations) as alternative actors of international cooperation is starting to be stressed in Japan as well. As reasons for this, not only is there the need to increase public support for the Japanese government's ODA efforts, but there is

also a growing demand for individual citizens to become involved in international cooperation of their own free will. It has also become extremely important that the government actively support such civilian efforts.

It is a well-known fact that Japan is the world's largest provider of ODA. The activities of Japan's NGOs, however, which basically have a major responsibility in the provision of that aid, are not well known. This is the case even in Japan, let alone the rest of the world, where very few people are even aware of the existence of Japan's NGOs. Compared with the United States and Europe, which have given the world such famous NGOs as the Red Cross, CARE, PLAN (Foster Parent Plan), Save the Children, and OXFAM, all of which operate on a global scale, the number of similar

Figure. Trends in establishment of NGOs and accumulated total



NGOs originating in Japan is extremely small. The reality is that the famous Japanese corporate giants have become the face of Japan.

In fact, many citizens' groups have been formed in Japan since the end of the war, and these groups have been very active. Most of these groups, however, have addressed only domestic problems, and it is only since the 1980s that they have become more active in international cooperation. The history of international cooperation by Western NGOs stretches back 100 years, compared to just 20 years for Japan. Those Japanese NGOs involved in international cooperation are currently in the process of strengthening their organizations (securing staff, and funds). In other words, one must admit that Japan's NGO activities must be seen in some respects as still at the "developing" stage. Compared with those of the West, Japan's NGOs are still immature in terms of organization, philosophies and policies and in many other respects. Nevertheless, they have been able to take advantage of their relatively late start and learn from the outcomes and limitations of European and U.S. NGOs. In Asia in particular, Japan's NGOs are exploring new forms of international cooperation together with Asian NGOs.

A survey by the Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC) has shown that Japan currently has more than 400 NGOs (Civil Society Organizations or CSOs) who deal mainly in international cooperation. This number becomes even greater if we also include those organizations for whom international cooperation is just one of a variety of activities. Such groups include religious organizations, social welfare organizations, consumer groups, labor unions and consumer cooperatives. In this paper, dealing mainly with CSOs, I will examine the current state of international cooperation by Japan's NGOs and the challenges facing them. (From this point onwards, unless otherwise stated, "NGO" refers to CSOs involved in international cooperation.)

Table 1 A list of the most representative Japanese NGOs and their dates of establishment

(a) JOCS (Japan Overseas Christian Medical Cooperative Service), 1960 OISCA (Organization for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement), 1961 JOICFP (Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning), 1968 Shapla Neer, 1972 ARI (Asian Rural Institute), 1973 PARC (Pacific Asia Resource Center), 1973 CCWA (Christian Child Welfare Association), 1975
(b) AAR (Association for Aid and Relief, Japan), 1979 JVC (Japan International Volunteer Center), 1980 CYR (Caring for Young Refugees), 1980 JIFH (Japan International Food for the Hungry), 1981 SVA (Shanti Volunteer Association), 1981 AMDA (The Association of Medical Doctors in Asia), 1984
(c) JAFS (The Japan Asian Association & Asian Friendship Society), 1979 AHI (Asian Health Institute), 1980 The PHD Foundation, 1981 Plan International Japan, 1983
(d) Save the Children Japan, 1986 CARE Japan, 1987 World Vision Japan, 1987 MSF Japan, 1992
(e) AGS (Action for Greening Sahel), 1991 CARA (Association for the Cooperation and Rural Self-support in West Africa), 1992 AJF (Africa Japan Forum), 1993

History and Current State of International Cooperation NGOs in Japan

The origins of NGO activities in Japan can be found in the activities of citizens' groups from the end of World War II to the mid-1970s. In addition to international issues such as the pacifist movement, these groups were also involved in domestic issues such as social welfare and consumer protection in Japan. Later, around 1980, the relief effort for Indochinese refugees sparked a sharp rise in the number of NGOs embarking on international cooperation efforts for the South. (Figure 1)

Every two years, JANIC publishes a Directory of Japanese NGOs Concerned with International Cooperation (hereinafter referred to as the "Directory"). The 2000 edition of this Directory contained 387 organizations (this includes only those groups that responded to the JANIC survey; about 50 NGO groups did not respond). Back in 1982, the NGO Study Group (a group of six interested researchers, including myself) had already produced a directory of Japan's international cooperation NGOs, the first directory of its kind in Japan. That 1982 directory contained only 86 NGOs, a number that has swelled by five times in the 18 years since then. There has been a particularly remarkable increase in the

number of new organizations founded in the 1990s.

Different Characteristics According to Timing of Establishment

In terms of the dates of establishment of these NGOs, until 1978, only a handful of new organizations were being founded every year. Most of the NGOs established in that period, while almost completely unknown at the time, are now seen as having played a pioneering role in Japan's NGO achievements. (Table 1 [a]) In the next four years, from 1979 to 1982, there was a sudden jump in the numbers, with 40 new groups being formed. Those years around 1980 changed the face of Japan's NGOs greatly. It was at this time that large numbers of refugees from the Indochinese nations flowed into Thailand. In Japan at the time, religious organizations, labor unions and other groups set themselves the task of aiding those refugees. They systematically raised money and entered the refugee camps in Thailand with food and other emergency relief supplies. Meanwhile, many citizens that were not affiliated with any particular groups learned of the situation in Thailand through the media, and established new NGOs of their own. Many of the NGOs founded around 1980 initially dealt predominantly with emergency relief, but since then they have

also moved onto more constant development cooperation efforts. (Table 1 [b]) In addition to these refugee relief NGOs, a number of other NGOs that now represent Japan were established during that period. (Table 1 [c])

In the ten years from 1985, an average of twenty to forty new NGOs were formed every year. A notable pattern from 1985 to around 1990 was the establishment of Japanese branches or sister organizations of international networking NGOs (Table 1 [d]) and NGOs for African aid. (Table 1 [e])

In line with this growth in the number of NGOs all over Japan, as if to seize the opportunity, two groups were formed in 1987 for the purpose of networking among NGOs – one in Tokyo and the other in Osaka. JANIC, which was established in Tokyo, currently has 63 regular NGO members, and essentially acts as a networking organization covering the whole of Japan, taking the lead in advocacy and dialogue with the Japanese government. The Kansai NGO Council, which was established in Osaka, has 23 NGO members, predominantly in the Kansai region.

In the 1990s, global environmental issues and the Gulf War sparked an interest in international cooperation among many Japanese citizens, leading to the establishment of many NGOs. One of the two major characteristics of this period is the birth of NGOs dedicated to relief work as a result of new emergency situations (e.g., the Kosovo conflict and natural disasters). Two typical examples of this type of NGO are the Japan

Emergency NGOs (JEN), which was formed in 1994, and Peace Winds Japan (PWJ), which was established in 1996. The other feature of this period was the formation of groups to promote regional networking among NGOs. These include the Fukuoka NGO Network in 1993, the Nagoya NGO Center in 1995 and the Saitama NGO Council for International Cooperation, also in 1995.

In conclusion, of Japan's 387 NGOs, 357 (92%) were founded after 1979, and about 200 of those have been established since 1990. The relative youth of many of Japan's NGOs is a characteristic of Japan's NGO community. (Incidentally, many of the internationally famous Western NGOs were founded between the late 1930s and the 1960s.)

Organization, Finances, Human Resources

Less than 30% of the 387 NGOs in Japan are incorporated. This may be difficult to believe, but in Japan, it is extremely difficult for ordinary citizens' groups to obtain legal status as foundations or corporations. The reasons for this are the huge amounts of money (at least ¥100 million) required at the time of establishment and the excessively strict regulations imposed by the competent authorities. It was because of these hurdles that the Law to Promote Specified Non-profit Activities (also known as the NPO Law) was passed in 1998, allowing NGOs to obtain legal status without the need for large amounts of funds and through a relatively simple application process. Thanks to this law, many NGOs are now obtaining legal status. Legal status not only gives organizations credibility within Japan, but it also helps them to obtain the trust of the governments in the countries where they are conducting activities. However, not all groups are so keen to become corporations. A considerable number of organizations are too small to warrant it, and many want to remain as inde-

pendent as possible from government regulations.

Out of the 387 NGOs, I will next look at the financial situations of 238 leading NGOs for which I was able to obtain detailed information. The 238 organizations had total annual revenues of about ¥23.6 billion in fiscal year 1998. Those with revenues of less than ¥10 million accounted for the highest, 25% of the total, followed by the 20% of NGOs with revenues of between ¥10 million and ¥20 million. Only 40 NGOs have annual revenues in excess of 100 million yen. The highest annual revenue of any single NGO is approximately ¥5 billion.

Meanwhile, 72% of the 238 leading NGOs have paid employees. This is a major improvement from ten years ago, when only 50% of NGOs had paid staff. Only a handful of those NGOs have more than 100 employees, however, and most of the remainder have only one to ten people on their payrolls. Also, according to JANIC surveys, 90% of those NGOs with paid employees provide annual wages of no more than ¥5 million yen per person. Despite the huge expectations being placed on NGOs by society, the low wages that they are able to offer their paid employees, who play the central roles in their operations, ultimately prevents them from securing the necessary human resources.

Regions of Activity and Areas and Types of Cooperation

In the past, most of Japan's NGOs operated in Asia, but in recent years, their activities have also extended to Africa and Central and South America. Major areas of cooperation are education, health and medicine, environmental conservation and agricultural development. Education in particular is an area in which many of the NGOs established since 1990 are involved. More recently, the area of "Peace Making" has also taken on increasing importance, with assistance being extended to such regions as Cambodia, East Timor and Kosovo. The types of cooperation activities undertaken by Japan's NGOs have also diversified, with development



Photo: TODAI

Afghan refugees receiving medical care provided by TODAI

cooperation being joined by such activities as emergency relief and activities within Japan.

In 2000, 17 NGOs involved in emergency relief formed a coalition called the Japan Platform, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The members of this coalition stay in close contact with each other in the pursuit of their activities. Last year, however, nine of those 17 NGOs decided to embark on relief efforts in Afghanistan, and only seven of them received funding from MOFA and commenced operations in this area. In addition, JANIC formed an Afghan Refugees Assistance Liaison in October, 2001 and began raising money independently. SVA, JVC, Shapla Neer and others are also raising their own funds, in collaboration with JANIC. Peshawar-Kai (founded in 1983) and TODAI (The Lighthouse International, 1988), which have been extending assistance to Afghan refugees for more than a decade, are also actively conducting relief programs. The priority of these organizations is on emergency assistance for those people still trapped inside Afghanistan. Unlike those NGOs that have instantly decided to assist Afghan refugees, these two groups have many years of experience in extending assistance in this area, and their policies, based on their long experience, in relief activities, have been well received by the Japanese public.

Activities within Japan include assistance extended towards foreign residents in Japan, the numbers of whom have soared since the late 1980s, "alternative trading", or the sale of products directly imported from southern developing countries, and development education activities, in which people learn about the challenges facing the global community. A large number of NGOs dedicated to these activities have been established since the late 1980s.

Japanese Government Support for NGOs

One must mention that one reason for this increase in NGO activity in Japan

Table 2 Major Governmental Assistance Programs

Ministry of Foreign Affairs • NGO Project Subsidy • NGO Emergency Assistance Grant Cooperation • Grant Assistance for Grass-Roots Projects • NGO Organizational Strengthening Assistance (including NGO Advisors Program and NGO Specialist Researcher Program)
Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) • Development Partnership Strategy • Small-Scale Development Partnership Strategy • Development Welfare Assistance Project

in recent years is that government support for NGOs has been enhanced. The major assistance programs are listed in Table 2.

Recently, dialogue between NGOs and the government is being pursued, with regular councils being held between NGOs and such organizations as the MOFA and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The existence of a forum where both sides can exchange views on an equal footing is of great importance. Nevertheless, the government does sometimes use funding as a shield to force NGOs to accept unreasonable projects. On the side of the NGOs, meanwhile, there is the inherent danger that, by accepting government funds, they will lose the independence that is such an important part of being a NGO. The fact that many NGOs are striving of late to keep government funding to within 50% of their total revenue is an indication of their awareness of the need to maintain that independence.

Conclusion

Today, at last, community interest in NGOs is growing in Japan, and they are becoming recognized as an important social sector. The current state of NGOs in Japan is synonymous with the current state of Japan's civil society itself. In that respect, we could say that, as a reflection of Japanese society, strengthening Japan's NGOs will encourage the maturation of Japan's civil society. This will be a touchstone for whether or not Japanese society will be able to build a democratic society that is truly centered on its citizens.

In the past, it was enough for small groups of citizens with an interest in global issues to speak out about the difficulties faced by the people in the South, appeal for donations, and con-

duct cooperation activities in the specific areas in which they were interested. Often, however, these efforts did not extend beyond the realm of self-satisfaction. In future, there will be many more opportunities in which we must exert international influence in the search for solutions to the structure of the problems faced by the world resulting from globalization. Organizational strengthening must be carried out for such a purpose, and at the same time, these groups must clarify their mission, that is, what they want their activities to achieve. This is the very least they must do if they want to speak and act as equals in the international community.

We must not forget that Japan was once an impoverished country itself, and that, after the Second World War, it was able to rebuild itself and prosper under extremely special circumstances in the midst of the East-West confrontation that was the Cold War. I firmly believe that, if it does not cooperate with the countries of Asia in particular, Japan will not be able to survive in the 21st century. For the people of Japan and Asia, the most important thing is to strive to achieve the ideal global community in this new century, and to work together to realize a fair global community in which all peoples can live together through their NGOs. NGOs must be organizations that guarantee this kind of international collaboration and cooperation among civilians.

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