CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATIONS AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE

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1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on how neighbourhood associations respond to the demographic challenge. Neighbourhood associations are an appropriate locus to examine for such a response, because, with nearly 300,000 groups\(^2\) across the archipelago, they are Japan’s most numerous form of civil society organization,\(^3\) and because, in formal membership, they encompass a large majority of Japanese. Moreover, there are subgroups attached to most neighbourhood associations (NHAs) that seem perhaps particularly well-suited to respond to either the ageing society or declining fertility aspects of the demographic challenge: elderly people’s clubs (rōjin-kai/rōjin kurabu) for the former problem, and children’s associations (kodomo-kai) and women’s associations (fujin-kai) for the latter.

Civil society organizations could, broadly speaking, address large-scale societal problems such as the demographic challenge in two ways. The first is to tackle the problem. This comes about largely through the provision of social capital (Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 2000; Pekkanen 2006) and the effective implementation of specific policies. We argue below that neighbourhood associations are effective in mitigating some of the problems facing the aged, but not as effective in mitigating the

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\(^1\) Authorship is equal.

\(^2\) According to The Survey on Neighborhood Associations with Legal Status 2003 (LS-NHA Survey), there were 296,770 NHAs in Japan as of 1 November 2002, out of which 22,050 NHAs had acquired a legal corporation status from municipalities (Ministry of General Affairs 2003).

\(^3\) See Tsujinaka 2002, 2003; Pekkanen 2006 on Japanese civil society organizations in general. In addition to the NHAs, there are more than 100,000 social associations (according to the telephone directory), 30,000 registered non-profit organizations (NPOs), or NGOs, 230,000 religious corporations, 15,000 social welfare corporations, 16,000 private school corporations, etc.
problems faced by potential parents. The second way civil society organizations can help to address large-scale problems is by improving the solution. Civil society groups can monitor the state’s solutions, as well as themselves formulate and propose new policy ideas. We argue below that, in contrast to, say, US advocacy groups such as AARP (American Association for Retired Persons) and NOW (National Organization for Women), Japan’s NHAs are by their nature unsuited to this type of contribution: they are congenitally unable to formulate or articulate alternative policy visions.

2. Neighbourhood Associations

Neighbourhood associations are an important aspect of civil society in Japan. Their names have some variations in different areas, such as jichi-kai [self-government association], chōnai-kai or chū-kai [town block association], buraku-kai [village district association], ku or ku-kai [district association], etc. All these are groups based on residential proximity, most often comprising from one hundred to one thousand households. Most Japanese are members in one or another NHA.

We adopt here Pekkanen’s definition of neighbourhood associations:

**Neighborhood associations** are voluntary groups whose membership is drawn from a small, geographically delimited, and exclusive residential area (a neighbourhood) and whose activities are multiple and are centered on that same area (Pekkanen 2006: 87, bold in the original).6