



Civil Society Monitor

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G8 Mobilization Reflects Progress of Japan's NGOs

Japan hosted the G8 Summit in July 2008 and, for the first time, civil society organizations around the country made a major push to shape the summit outcome. In contrast with the previous G8 Summit held in Japan eight years earlier, the flurry of civil society activity over the past year demonstrates how Japanese civil society has grown to play a greater role in international issues such as global health, development, and the environment.

Hundreds of Japanese NGOs and citizens groups participated in activities intended to shape the summit agenda, some in close collaboration with networks of NGOs and advocacy organizations around the world. One of the most prominent initiatives was the 2008 Japan G8 Summit NGO Forum, a coalition of 141 NGOs that came together more than a year before the Toyako Summit to help ensure that the voice of civil society would be taken into account in setting the summit agenda. The G8 NGO Forum advocated for greater commitments from G8 member states in three areas—the environment, poverty and development, and peace and human rights.

The forum's Poverty and Development Unit was led by Sumie Ishii, executive director of the Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP) and one of the country's most prominent NGO leaders in the field of global health. In the following interview, she shares her personal views on what these activities say about the growing capacity of Japanese civil society and the challenges it faces.

How have Japan's NGOs been involved in overseas development?

Traditionally, in Japan, NGOs have been viewed as groups "who sweat in the field

for less money." This kind of image still exists, and even today we often hear foreign ministry officials say, "because of your request we are trying to modify our ODA [official development assistance] structure and policy. So, it's your turn to implement it. You are ready to do this, aren't you?" That's a challenge we still face today.

When did Japanese NGOs start getting involved in advocacy?

For JOICFP, it was the early 1990s when there was a series of international conferences. The UN International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 in Cairo was an epoch-making event that encouraged us to undertake more systematic advocacy activities. This was the first international conference where Japan had NGO representatives in its delegation. And for the first time, the foreign ministry attended an NGO meeting organized at the conference site, where the Japanese government explained the [funding] schemes that are available for NGOs. But it was hard to involve the Japanese government in this meeting. We tried to involve NGO people who were sensitive and not too confrontational so the discussions would be positive. This encouraged government officials to take a step forward for the first time.

How much has changed since then?

Some NGOs started a regular dialogue on global health with the foreign ministry soon after 1994, and JOICFP has been playing a role as the secretariat ever since. The continuation of this dialogue came to serve as a foundation for civil society and government to work together. Now we at least have a fairly good basis of trust between the foreign ministry and the NGO side. At least the ministry is ready to receive our professional input into the policies it is formulating. That is good.

Of course, many in the core group of NGOs in the field of public health today are relatively new. They began getting involved in advocacy after 2000. Before then, there were not so many NGOs working on advocacy.

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Key Civil Society Initiatives Targeting the 2008 G8 Summit

One distinguishing characteristic of this year's Toyako G8 Summit was that, for the first time, a wide range of Japanese civil society organizations mobilized to shape public opinion and influence Japanese and world leaders' thinking on global issues. The following are some of the more prominent initiatives.

2008 Japan G8 NGO Summit Forum—A coalition of 141 NGOs, the forum served as the central coordinating mechanism for G8 advocacy. It drafted policy platforms in three areas—development, the environment, and peace and human rights—and sponsored outreach activities to engage the Japanese public.

Civil G8 Dialogue—This April conference, which was organized by the G8 NGO Forum, brought together Japanese civil society leaders with key figures from overseas advo-

cacy groups, and included a roundtable session with all of the G8 sherpas.

Takemi Working Group—This high-level group urged the Japanese government to prioritize global health issues in the summit and is now following up on the G8 commitments with proposals for health system strengthening. Organized by JCIE, it is headed by Keizo Takemi, a prominent politician, and includes nongovernmental experts, practitioners, and government officials.

2008 People's Summit—This “alternative summit” hosted by the G8 NGO Forum and the Hokkaido People's Forum on the G8 Summit brought together NGOs from around the world to focus on issues such as poverty and environmental degradation. The resulting “Sapporo Declaration” outlined measures to end global poverty. ❁

Did civil society play a substantially different role in the Toyako G8 Summit?

Yes, I think there are substantial differences. On the NGO side, we have many younger people now with expertise in advocacy and international experience. They provide a source of power. Meanwhile, in the foreign ministry, there was a fairly strong decision to try to make this G8 process as open and participatory as possible. Even Prime Minister Fukuda clearly announced that he wanted to make it participatory, so I think the government was ready to do it this time.

Whom have you found it most important to target for advocacy activities in Japan?

We set several targets, including legislators, bureaucrats, media, and of course, high-level policymakers and experts. But in Japan, policies are often drafted by the middle-level bureaucrats, and for the G8 Summit there were only a few core people who were in charge of the meeting preparations. Most were not experts

in their assigned field so they had to face a heavy burden. It is common for them to not know anything about the subject area until the day they are transferred to their new position and suddenly told, “You are here, so now you are in charge of the G8.” Just like that! So people who never thought about HIV/AIDS or women dying in delivery all of a sudden had to work on global health issues and coordinate everything for the summit meeting.

So from our point of view what we need is first to try to carefully and closely work with those bureaucrats who work on the front lines. We try to get involved, exchange information, consult, and negotiate with them as much as and as frequently as possible, not only in actual meetings but also through e-mails and sending policy recommendations. It takes a huge amount of time and effort. But this time these processes have been stimulating because to empower [these bureaucrats] we have to put ourselves in their shoes—analyze international trends, gather information, and mobilize other stakeholders to influence them.

What was the rationale for establishing the G8 NGO Forum?

There was a strong undercurrent of determination among NGOs that we wanted to speak with one voice so that we could make our voice heard and encourage the G8 leaders to deliver what we asked for. We wanted to have one request and coherent, coordinated policy recommendations.

Have your efforts paid off in the G8 process?

The process this time has been stimulating for both the government and the NGOs. To work with the Japanese government and make policy recommendations, we have to strengthen our international network, consult with our partner organizations in other G8 countries, and study the global agenda so that we can share information with the foreign ministry. The foreign ministry has its own network with international agencies and the governments of other G8 countries, and they also try to explore possibilities with them as well. But this was the first time that they had this kind of openness in which they tried to invite everyone to participate in order to produce a better outcome.

Consensus and compromise are so important in Japan. Was it difficult to get everyone to agree on prioritizing a few items?

It takes a lot of time, negotiation, and energy. It's just like having a mini UN! Each NGO has its own agenda. Even among organizations working on the health-related MDGs [Millennium Development Goals], we [at JOICFP] work on MDG 5 [on maternal health] while others work on MDGs 4 [on child health] and 6 [on communicable diseases]. So you can imagine how difficult it has been. When we began working as the G8 NGO Forum, I heard that a similar attempt in Germany during the last round of the G8 did not succeed. But we stubbornly kept working on it and tried to coordinate and harmonize our efforts. In the end, it paid off and it made it easy for us to deal with the government ministries and the bureaucracies. They considered the G8 NGO Forum to be a partner representing civil society, and they could negotiate with us. Most of the work on the G8 processes ended up going through discussions between the NGO Forum and the foreign ministry.

How do you evaluate Japanese civil society's contributions to the Toyako G8 process?

I think it has been a success. This G8 process was really unique, and this can

be an example of how to ensure transparency and accountability involving not only Japanese civil society but the global community as well. There are so many international and global NGOs that are really interested in this G8 process, but most Western NGOs at the beginning didn't know what to do. So they tried to find a Japanese partner with whom they could work. This also helped us expand our global network, and while we tried to give them as much information as possible, we also tried to grasp their needs so that we could incorporate them into our policy recommendations.

What constraints did you face?

One of the important things is that support from private foundations made this advocacy possible this time. But unfortunately, most of it was not from Japan. Two things can be said about this. One is that Japanese NGOs have grown up enough to ask for money internationally, from foundations outside of Japan. The other is that Japanese society is not yet ready to support civil advocacy activities. They have been supporting some, but not much. For example, for the People's Summit in Sapporo, which was organized simultaneously with the G8 Summit, they collected funding from Japanese donors—not in large amounts but in bits and pieces. But still the core

of the advocacy effort was supported by overseas private foundations. Therefore, I hope that this G8 process also made Japanese foundations think about the importance of advocacy work and the role of civil society.

What does the future hold for Japanese NGOs working in international development?

We are dissolving the G8 NGO Forum. We made it clear when we started that our purpose was just to work up to the Toyako G8 Summit. In the field of global health, we have built a foundation for NGOs to have a regular dialogue with the foreign ministry, so what we are hoping is that global health will have enough momentum to be included in the agenda of the G8 for several more years. That is one thing. Also, we would like our recommendations to be reflected in Japanese ODA policy. Of course, the first priority is to increase the amount of ODA. So far, the prospects are not very bright, but we will never give up on working to increase it. In two years, Japan's Mid-Term ODA Policy will be revised. That is our next target. And later, the Japanese ODA Charter will be revised. Every 10 years they revise it, so we may be able to target that, too. ❀

Recent Developments in Japanese Civil Society

- February 2008—The Japan Foundation Center's annual survey indicates that the 20 most generous foundations made ¥28.6 billion (US\$243 million) in grants in the fiscal year ending March 2007, roughly 3 percent of the grantmaking of the top 20 US foundations.
- March 2008—Tenth anniversary of the establishment of the NPO Law, creating a new category of nonprofits with a lower threshold for legal recognition. By March 2008, as many as 34,371 "NPOs" had been registered.
- August 2008—The killing of an NGO aid worker in Afghanistan sparks the withdrawal of Japanese NGOs from the country.
- December 2008—Phasing-in begins for a new legal framework for Japan's 25,000 public interest corporations (*koeki hojin*), comprising the country's largest and most established nonprofit organizations. These organizations must reregister and then reapply for preferential tax treatment.

Inaugural Tiffany Foundation Award Honors Enterprising Nonprofits

When a community group that had revived the tradition of “village kabuki” in the Nishi-shiogo area decided to replace the stage curtain that had been used since the 1820s, it did not go shopping for theater supplies. Instead, it went looking for cotton seeds. The members of the Nishi-shiogo Revolving Theater Preservation Committee felt that if they were serious about carrying on the region’s traditions, they should make a new curtain the traditional way, growing the cotton, weaving it by hand, and then having it dyed and decorated using traditional techniques. The entire process ended up taking five years.

It was this spirit that led to the selection of the Nishi-shiogo Committee and the Mino Washi Akari Art Contest & Exhibition Organizing Committee as the first recipients of the Tiffany Foundation Award for the Preservation of Japanese Traditional Arts and Culture in Contemporary Society. This new awards program was launched to encourage nonprofit organizations to undertake innovative projects that keep alive traditional activities and utilize them to revitalize communities. On June 26, 2008, the two winners were honored in a ceremony in Tokyo where each was presented with a custom-made Tiffany trophy and a prize of ¥2 million, or approximately US\$20,000.

As Japan’s population ages and the sustained economic stagnation in the countryside drives younger workers to the cities, many forms of traditional arts and craftsmanship are beginning to die out. In order to help preserve this heritage, The Tiffany & Co. Foundation and JCIE decided to establish the annual award. This was a natural outgrowth of the foundation’s emphasis on preserving the cultural and historical legacy of fine craftsmanship and its interest in making a societal contribution in Japan.

The Mino Washi Akari Art Contest and Exhibition Organizing Committee is a prime example of how civil society initiatives to preserve the country’s rich traditional heritage can be tied to community revitalization. Mino was once home to 5,000 *washi* (handmade paper) production houses but, with competition from machine-made Western paper, now only 30 workshops remain. Mino *washi* has long been used in the

construction of paper lanterns because of the distinctive soft glow it throws off, and the group decided to take advantage of this by inviting artisans from around the country to create intricate “light sculptures” that are then displayed at a nighttime festival along the town’s traditional-style streets. This event has gained nationwide attention and it attracts tens of thousands of visitors to the town each October.

Similarly, even though the hamlet of Nishi-shiogo has only 68 households, the Nishi-shiogo Revolving Theater Preservation Committee has succeeded

in reviving the centuries-old tradition of “village kabuki.” Every three years, more than 100 local residents spend a month building a temporary theater using traditional methods. They then stage two days of kabuki performances, using it as an opportunity to teach local schoolchildren. The announcement of the Tiffany Foundation Award has already encouraged Nishi-shiogo groups to undertake a new initiative to preserve local architecture, and the award organizers also hope that the recognition associated with the award will inspire other organizations around the country to launch similar innovative efforts. 🌱

For more information: www.jcie.or.jp/civilnet/philanprograms



Tiffany Foundation President Fernanda Kellogg presents the inaugural award

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Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE/Japan)
9-17 Minami Azabu 4-chome
Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-0047
Tel: 81-3-3446-7781 Fax: 81-3-3443-7580
E-mail: admin@jcie.or.jp
www.jcie.or.jp

Japan Center for International Exchange, Inc. (JCIE/USA)
274 Madison Avenue, Suite 1102
New York, NY 10016
Tel: 212-679-4130 Fax: 212-679-8410
E-mail: info@jcie.org
www.jcie.org

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