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Duty-Based Approaches to Community Development:
A Workable Solution?

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ABSTRACT   *The article explores the possibility of integrating the notion of civic duty in community development in Asia. It focuses on the case of Japan's Big Society where the majority of households, both urban and rural, are organised into neighbourhood associations. Japan is one of the leading donors in Asia. As such, it tries to reform local governance in developing Asia through encouraging people's own initiatives at the grass roots. Domestically, however, people's participation is solicited through resorting to their sense of civic duty and reciprocity as well as to their fear of exclusion from the top-down system of disaster management and refuse collection. Given that many of the Asian countries receiving aid show a similar sense of communal responsibility, a new approach to community development based on the notion of duty, alongside that of rights, should be considered.*

1.   Introduction

The central features of community development promoted by donor-driven development initiatives can be described in terms of participation, empowerment and citizenship formation. In the increasingly 'inclusive' neoliberal development agenda, the poor in low-income countries are to be empowered and be awakened to the right to own the processes of development (Hickey, 2010). The awakened individuals are then to become voluntary participants in many of the community activities and so prove themselves good citizens. Sceptics argue that the project of empowering the poor in the prevailing development practice reduces the relational problem of poverty to one associated with individual inadequacy. It therefore fails to harness collective social dynamics (see Green, 2006). Whether one looks at the need for individual empowerment or the social relations surrounding the poor, the poor should be encouraged to willingly participate in community activities or to voluntarily negotiate their way through broader social processes to better their positions.

In a real world there are many circumstances in which participation in community activities or negotiations in a broader social sphere is a result not so much of individuals' free choice as of coercion prompted by certain institutional mechanisms. In parts of East Asia where a sense of civic duty and communal responsibility have reportedly been regulating people's behaviour, at least traditionally,[2] the coercion takes the form of residents' mutual expectations to carry out civic duties. This paper explores the ways in which the notion of civic duty, along

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[2]See SGRA report No.52 for the discussion of civil society in East Asia (2009).

with the notions of citizenship and rights, can be integrated into development thinking. It does so by examining the case of Japan where local government routinely mobilises the help of local communities through an institutional mechanism for civic duty fulfilment. This is ironic, given the fact that Japan, as one of the leading donors in developing Asia, promotes the kind of participatory approaches as advocated by Western donors. These are based on bottom-up, voluntary processes of empowerment and rights fulfilment.

In Britain the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government has launched a campaign to build a "Big Society" through giving more powers to neighbourhoods and communities. This implies greater devolution of power as well as slimming the state budgets. Japan's Big Society is seemingly more hierarchical and coercive. What holds it together is a sense of moral and social obligations. Without it, it would be difficult to maintain the Big Society.

Much of the empirical data discussed in this paper is derived from on-going participatory observation by the author since April 2010 in a community of 260 households in Nagoya City, the third largest city in Japan.

2.   Neighbourhood associations in Japan

What is the institutional mechanism for civic duty fulfilment in Japan? The main vehicle for citizen mobilisation for collective action is *Chonaikai*, or a neighbourhood association. In Japan almost all households, both rural and urban, are organised into neighbourhood associations. The history of the neighbourhood associations in Japan goes back to the 15th century when rice farming practices necessitated communal activities. The neighbourhood associations were strengthened in 1940 by Japan's war-time government which tried to mobilize citizen's cooperation for the war. After World War II, the Occupation Force officially disbanded the neighbourhood associations. They have survived the ban, however, as indigenous social networks to this day. Currently, the membership is, in principle, voluntary. But the majority of all citizens in Japan choose to become a member of the neighbourhood associations.

The neighbourhood associations have five main characteristics (Nakata 2007, p.12). First, they have clear geographical boundaries which divide one neighbourhood community from another. Second, their membership is household-based. Third, all the households within the geographical boundaries can become a member. Fourth, they may deal with all matters concerning their members, official or personal. Fifth, they represent the communities vis-à-vis local authorities or any other external bodies or persons. The fourth characteristic of the neighbourhood associations is controversial as their involvement in what should be left to individuals has given

rise to nation-wide debates. Some neighbourhood associations have reportedly supported certain candidates at the time of elections. Many of them continue to help the local *Shinto* shrines collect donations and cash offerings. On the other hand, their activities for helping the aged are appreciated by citizens and local government alike, especially after the Personal Information Protection Law passed in 2005 made it difficult for private individuals to locate the aged population.

Ten to twenty neighbourhood associations form a federation that takes responsibility for a *Gakku*, or a primary school catchment area. Ten to thirty federations of neighbourhood associations assist the ward office, the lowest administrative unit under the city, and the local police as well as the fire brigade. To facilitate the task, the head of each neighbourhood association gets appointed as a collaborative member of the ward-level local administration by the city mayor.

Within a neighbourhood association roughly five to twenty households are grouped together as one unit, and they take turns to become a group leader for one year. Community circulars are distributed once a month through the contact network of the group leaders down to individual households. The majority of the circulars originate from the ward office, the police force, or the fire brigade. They carry messages about local crimes and accidents as well as events organised to alert citizens to their risks. A sense of communal responsibilities and civic duties is generated top-down by the local government as these circulars descends upon the head of the neighbourhood association at a monthly meeting of the federation. The head of the association is also required to attend meetings and events organised by the ward office.

It is not surprising then that there is a persistent criticism of the apparent role of the neighbourhood associations in subcontracting local government's jobs. In fact, many of the activities which neighbourhood associations carry out, such as crime prevention, disaster management, clean-up operations, and waste recycling, fall within the areas in which clear demarcation of responsibilities between local government and communities does not exist. Thus the more positive view is constructed around the notion of *partnership* in which local government and residents work together to create a safe and peaceful community (see Nakata, 2007). Creating 'a safe and peaceful community' has been a national slogan promoted by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport since 2008 when it organised a committee comprising academics and a city mayor to discuss how to create safe and peaceful communities. The mid-term report entitled "A Vision for the Creation of Safe and Peaceful Communities" was compiled in June 2009. The report identifies local government, community, and the private sector (i.e., businesses and private citizens) as the three main agents to share responsibilities for the creation of safe and peaceful communities. In line with this vision, the federation of neighbourhood associations organises clean-up operations,

traffic safety campaigns, disaster management drills, neighbourhood patrols, and waste recycling operations in close cooperation with local authorities that include the police and the fire brigade.

Many of the individual residents who are members of the neighbourhood association show little interest in these activities, however. Changing lifestyles as well as household compositions, due largely to aging, make it increasingly difficult for each household to voluntarily participate in them. The only time they are obliged to participate is when their turn as a group leader and possibly as the head of a neighbourhood association has come.[3] In other words, individual residents do not get regularly mobilised for community activities. It is only when their time of service comes - once in five years or so[4]- that they will resign themselves to participate. In other times, the minimum responsibility they are expected to fulfil is to pass on circulars to their immediate neighbour.

Group leaders get appointed to various posts including the head of the neighbourhood association, athletic meeting organisers, public health officers, and disaster management officers. Additionally, group leaders take turns to guard waste recycling collection points managed by the neighbourhood association. One's turn to attend this duty comes roughly once every month. When one is on duty, one gets to the collection site at 7:30 in the morning and spends one hour removing aluminium or plastic tops from steel cans and PET bottles.

Every resident joining the neighbourhood association is expected to shoulder these responsibilities sometime in the future. Even if the time to do so is not too frequent, it worries many of the residents, especially the elderly ones who live on their own.[5] Why should they bother to organise themselves into the neighbourhood association in the first place? What is it that they gain from it? Is it the prospect for collective well-being which motivates them even if it is only remotely associated with individual gain? Is it due to the normative aspect of the community as an institution towards which individual residents feel socially obligated? Or is it the fear of offending neighbours and of suffering from social exclusion as a result of it?

All of them may play a part, but the incentive to fulfil civic duty through association membership is strongly linked to the imminent threat of disasters (i.e., a big earthquake, typhoons, and floods) and to the collective system of waste recycling. These two provide residents the major incentives to join the neighbourhood association.

3. **Incentives to join: disasters and wastes**

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[3]As nobody wishes to become the head of the neighbour association, the post has been filled by a lottery in the fieldwork community.

[4] The number of households in one neighbourhood group differs between five and seventeen in the fieldwork community.

[5]The proportion of the population aged above 65 in the fieldwork community is estimated to be about twenty per cent, according to the list prepared for the Respect for the Aged Day.

What do Japan's neighbourhood associations do to help people minimize damage in the event of a disaster? Japan is an earthquake-prone archipelago located in an area where continental and oceanic plates meet. Many parts of the country have experienced big earthquakes. The Great Kanto Earthquake hit the Kanto plain in 1923, while the Great Hanshin Earthquake hit Kobe in 1995 claiming about 6,000 casualties. The Great Tokai Earthquake has been expected for over 25 years. All the communities in the Tokai region, of which Nagoya City is a part, have been preparing themselves for the inevitable disaster. Emergency drills are regularly conducted, both at work and at the community throughout the Tokai region in which neighbourhood associations play an important role. In the above-mentioned report "A Vision for the Creation of a Safe and Peaceful Community", the threat of natural disasters features prominently alongside that of crimes and the aging of the population.[6] As for crime prevention, a team of five to six heads of the federated neighbourhood associations (or their wives or other members of the families) form a patrol unit and patrol the communities once every month. This is done in the afternoon, between 16:00 and 17:00. The patrollers are often older women (i.e., wives of the heads of the neighbourhood associations who have been persuaded to accept the post after retirement). The community patrol hence has more symbolic than protective effects in the short term. In the longer term, the number of people who have done the patrol and thus become familiar with the community environment increases each year. It may be said that it is the greater familiarity of the residents with the community environment that contributes to crime prevention over time, albeit indirectly. Apart from natural disasters and crimes, a growing incidence of solitary death among the aging population is considered a personal disaster. To tackle with the problem with increasing vigour, neighbourhood associations use the Respect for the Aged Day (the third Monday of September each year) to identify and monitor the aged population while distributing small gifts to them.

The centralised system of waste recycling[7] is another important reason why people fear exclusion from the neighbourhood association. While local government takes charge of ordinary refuse collection, collection of such recyclable garbage as used papers, clothes, bottles, plastics, and cans is handled by the federation of neighbourhood associations in cooperation with the local government. Those who are not members of the neighbourhood associations are, in principle, to take the recyclable garbage to recycling stations designated by Nagoya City. These are smaller in number than the local collection points managed by the neighbourhood associations which are within walking distance. Moreover, collection of recyclable garbage by the city's

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[6]See the introduction of the report (pp.1-3). It starts with a reference to earthquakes with the seismic intensity of above six, according to the Japanese scale of zero to seven.

[7]It is 'centralised' in the sense that the standardised system operates throughout Japan and the majority of Japan's population are integrated in it. One may see it as 'decentralised' in the sense that local government leaves large part of the operations to neighbourhood associations.

designated agent is less frequent (once a month) than by the neighbourhood associations (once a week). It is clear that people who do not join the neighbourhood associations would face considerable inconvenience in recyclable refuse disposal. The inconvenience would not arise, of course, if people stop bothering with recycling altogether. Yet amidst the nation-wide campaign for the promotion of recycling and the emergency alert declared in 1999 by the Nagoya Mayor against the overwhelming amount of refuse, the system of waste recycling has been firmly built into people's everyday life.

Are the imminent threat of disasters and the collective system of waste recycling enough to serve as incentives for the local residents to join the neighbourhood association? Are there any problems of free-riders? In the event of a big disaster, it would be humanely impossible to exclude non-members from disaster management operations. It would look mean as well if a neighbourhood association bans non-members from leaving recyclable garbage at a neighbourhood collection point. Yet the people who know each other well through participation in community activities are less likely to be left alone and forgotten at the time of disasters. Exclusion from the neighbourhood waste recycling points does happen quite commonly in communities throughout Japan. As a matter of fact, disputes over waste management and recycling are among the most common neighbourly disputes in Japan.[8] Participation in the neighbourly waste recycling operations is arguably the bigger incentive than that in disaster management operations. Most residents prefer joining in at the cost of paying the monthly membership fee of 2 US dollars to not joining in and risking potential neighbourly disputes over waste recycling.[9]

In addition to these utility-maximising incentives, the feeling of reciprocity held by the residents play a big part in their decision to contribute to community development through neighbourhood association membership. Kahan argues (2002, p.1) that when people perceive that "others are behaving cooperatively, individuals are moved by honour, altruism, and like dispositions to contribute to public goods even without the inducement of material incentives". They would withdraw cooperative action, on the other hand, if they perceive that "others are shirking or otherwise taking advantage of them" (ibid.). The sense of carrying out communal duties as others before them have done so is indeed strong among those whose turn to serve as a group leader has come. The feeling is typically expressed in such words as: "I owe others before me who have done their bit. Now it is my turn to do the same" (personal communications, 2010). They moreover take action to enforce neighbours' cooperative behaviour by watching it and expressing disapproval when it is not cooperative. The sense of disapproval grows especially

[8]It is easy to find websites dealing with questions regarding the neighbourly disputes over refuse collection and waste recycling. See, for example, "*Gomishushubasho-wachouminkyoyu-no mono* (Are the waste recycling points owned by the neighbourhood association?)" 2010.

[9]Some are asked to stop using the waste recycling points managed by the neighbourhood association. Others are not returned greetings on the streets ("*Gomishushubasho-wachouminkyoyu-no mono*" 2010; "*Chonaikai-to gomisuteba-no kankeittenani?*" 2010)

when one stands at a waste recycling point in the chilly morning, removing aluminium tops from steel cans. One inadvertently grumbles to one's neighbours about those who fail to show up on their days of duty, or about those who bring their wastes without following the rules. Those who leave the wastes while not being a member of the association would bring out the worst in the people fulfilling their neighbourly duties.

4.   How can we integrate 'duty fulfilment' in development practice?

What lessons can we draw from the kind of institutional arrangements that exist in Japan, with its incentives and reciprocal norms for collective action? Civic spirit is not unique to Japan. Putnam (1993) has found that the civic spirit strongly manifested in voluntary associations in Northern Italy has led to its economic growth and democratic institution building. Donor institutions have popularized the notion of social capital as the missing link in development (Grootaert 1998). The high growth rates of East Asia in the 1990s have been explained in terms of social capital in that government and industry created "institutional arrangements and organizational designs that enhanced efficiency, exchange of information, and cooperation" between them (Grootaert 1998, p.1). Thus, the role of social capital in promoting development has been extensively discussed in the development community. As mentioned earlier in the Introduction, citizenship formation has also been promoted by the development community as "central to overcoming the exclusions and inequalities associated with uneven development" (Hickey, 2010, p.1139). While discussions on social capital and citizenship underline the importance of community cohesion and civic responsibilities, at least in rich countries, why has this discourse not led to the discussion of duty-based approaches to community development?

   The answer may be sought in the fact that, far from neo-liberal thinking overpowering the mainstream development theory and practice with its associated concepts of growth-oriented development and resource allocation, the Western development discourse has been dominated more strongly by notions of freedom and choice. As long as social capital and collective action within the community have all to do with *trust* and voluntary participation in organisational life, it goes down well with the notions of democratic society and empowerment. Likewise, citizenship is framed in the development discourse in terms of a right to be included and to enhance human freedom and well-being. The concept of 'duty' in broader political debates, on the other hand, tends to be narrowly framed in terms of tax payment, voting, military draft, or jury duty. It sounds horribly cruel or misguided to encourage the down-trodden poor, not just in inner cities of rich countries but in rural communities of low-income countries, to become aware not only of their rights but of their duties. Yet it may

potentially offer a new approach, at least in parts of the developing world where reciprocal behaviourcould be channelled into a mechanism of collective action that generates cooperation between citizens and local government.

Sceptics may argue that it can only work in Japan, or else in wealthy communities in wealthy nations. Other sceptics such as Amin (2005) point out the hypocrisy involved in conceding the necessity of local community and social cohesion to poor areas while prosperous areas embrace universal, cosmopolitan culture. The latter criticism certainly does not apply in the case of Japan where wealthy communities take the national drive to create 'a safe and peaceful community' seriously, and have organised themselves for community-driven duty fulfilment. There is no reason to assume that the same approach should not work, at least in parts of East Asia where reciprocity is highly valued.

In the case of Japan's Big Society, the institutional mechanism for duty fulfilment is built upon the threat of disasters, natural and personal, as well as the collective system of waste recycling. In developing East Asia, the similar need for disaster and resource (and waste) management is growing. The need is not confined to East Asia. In parts of South Asia,[10] local intellectuals privately talk about 'the culture of individuality' too strong to generate cooperative behaviour among its people, despite the fact that such behaviour would be essential for sustainable growth and development. South Asia has been a hub of participatory community development. We have witnessed many successful empowerment projects implemented in South Asia. The empowerment of the poor through microfinance and microenterprise development in Bangladesh has been widely applauded, even though it is arguably based too much on individualised entrepreneurship promotion. As the progressive thinkers on the left note, the onus of decentralisation and redistribution of wealth and power should be more strongly put on the state. But to steer the fragile state in this direction, individuals should be organised into an effective institutional mechanism by which to forge partnership with the state. In this context, a sense of duty fulfilment may be the missing link that can connect individual empowerment with collective action.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the way Japan's Big Society is run through organising its citizens nationwide into neighbourhood associations. The incentives for the citizens to carry out civic duties within the framework of a neighbourhood association are the need for imminent disaster management and the collective system of waste

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[10]The specific example is Bangladesh where I have engaged in numerous discussions with local intellectuals over the possible reasons why poverty persists in the country.

recycling. Given these incentives as well as a general sense of neighbourly reciprocity, people can be urged to fulfil their community responsibilities and so create a safe and peaceful community.

As one of the leading donors in developing Asia, Japan has been supporting projects and programmes to reform local governance through encouraging people's bottom-up initiatives. Domestically, however, people's participation is solicited through resorting to their sense of civic duty and to their fear of exclusion from the top-down system of disaster management and refuse collection. Given that many of the Asian countries receiving aid have a similar sense of communal responsibilities culturally and politically ingrained in them, a new approach to community development based on the notion of civic duty, alongside the notion of rights, should be considered.

Although the coercive aspect of duty fulfilment raises many questions, self-motivated, voluntary participation of individuals in local decision-making – a central pillar of donor strategies for local governance reform – does not always work in Asia. Instead, individuals' voluntary action should be channelled into a more hierarchical system of collective action. The perceived need to collectively cope with disasters and refuse collection exists not only in Japan but elsewhere in Asia.

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