

## Citizen Participation Can Make a Difference in Social Support Networks A Case Study from Osaka, Japan

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The absence of a service delivery to the marginal population has been an unavoidable issue for Japanese social workers in recent years. It has become more crucial when the late 2000s financial crisis has hit Japan; the economic instability has highlighted the gaps between the existing service delivery system and vulnerable population, and it has proven the importance of formal-informal integration to fill in those gaps.

Given the background above, it seems that developments of social support networks have become one of the top priorities in today's service provision. This trend can be observed, for instance, in the long-term care insurance policy reform in 2005 when the local government was mandated to establish regional comprehensive support centers throughout Japan. Those community-based initiatives have been implemented by the government in order to strengthen the support networks in a neighborhood level, and that has changed the dynamics of public-private partnerships in a community. In other words, the establishment of social support networks has become an actual matter for each locality whereas it used to be discussed as an ideal approach.

As an outcome, neighborhood-based social support networks have been developed throughout Japan, and they typically have following characteristics. 1) It consists of people participating from both formal and informal sectors. 2) It holds conferences (periodical or non-periodical) to share the information and to strengthen the partnerships. 3) A helping profession, usually a social worker, plays a coordinating role in the network. 4) Welfare Commissioners, government-appointed volunteers who have a mission to be a primary resource in a neighborhood, are the essential members of the network, and their participation is the key for the network to function.

However, it seems that many social support networks tend to neglect the last characteristics. In my presentation, I will focus on the issues of social support networks in Japan, especially when the government develops the

networks without having consensus from the community members; as a result, the networks become superficial. To unveil this situation a case study was conducted at one municipality in Osaka, which community-based social workers helped to increase the level of citizen participation in the formation of social support networks.

The key findings from the case studies were that, 1) citizen participation cannot be achieved in one night. It requires real dialogues between formal sector and informal sectors to develop social support networks collaboratively. A top-down approach by the government would not produce a positive outcome in a community. 2) Social support networks could evolve in various forms. They could vary in terms of the size of the networks, and frequency, participants, and contents of meetings, etc. In other words, those networks need to be accustomed to the local cultures and they have to be culturally competent. 3) It was community-based social workers, who have managed to bring both formal and informal sectors together to form social support networks. They have spent years to build positive relationships with Welfare Commissioners, neighborhood residents, and other helping professions, and those facts need to be reflected in the future policy development.

Social support network is receiving more attention not only because it is a more affordable approach for the government but also it does provide more comprehensive support to the marginal population. The research findings, however, show us and warn us that we cannot be optimistic about the fact that government-led (or sometimes organization-led) social support networks are established throughout Japan. It could only mean that meetings are held regularly and members are identified, but those meetings may not have functional participation from the informal sector.

The suggestions to the future policy development and community-based approach will be provided at the end of the presentation.