

NPOS: THE SIGN OF A MATURE AND LIVABLE SOCIETY

TAMAKI KAWASAKI

Japan passed the Law Concerning the Promotion of Specific Non-Profit Organization Activities in 1998, and there are now over forty thousand nonprofit organizations (NPOs) active in the country. We spoke to the chairman of the Sawayaka Welfare Foundation, Tsutomu Hotta, who often works for NPOs, volunteer causes and other social improvement, about what these groups signify and the challenges that Japan's NPOs and NGOs face.

With the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake as well as the devastating heavy rains in 2018, the country's volunteer-based organizations and other social improvement groups have been gaining attention. What is the current state of NPOs and NGOs in Japan?

In postwar Japan, the government largely saw to the public good, so the concept of an NPO or nongovernmental organization (NGO) of self-aware citizens seeking to benefit society as a whole was



Tsutomu Hotta, chairman of the Sawayaka Welfare Foundation



not a familiar thing. After the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, however, people began to take more actions on their own. That inspired the passage of the Law Concerning the Promotion of Specific Non-Profit Organization Activities in 1998, which in turn led to a huge number of NPOs springing up all at once. The law was amended in 2011 to relax the requirements, which spurred the formation of even more groups; at one point there were close to fifty thousand NPOs. Things have calmed down, but these organizations are proceeding with their goals and their work.

What is the role of NPOs and NGOs in Japan, and what do they mean for Japan?

Japanese society has always been about collectivity and helping one another, with a strong sense of community. There are some areas that the government and the efforts of individuals can't cover, though. Public-interest corporations have been around since the Meiji Period (1868-1912), but before the rise of NPOs they required government approval, and were difficult to form into

corporations. The 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake brought about greater recognition within the general populace of such citizen-run independent organizations. Branching out from disaster relief, more social welfare and childcare-type programs that had existed quietly gained visibility, and NPOs began building a solid base in a wide range of fields.

The era in which NPOs developed is also known as the Japanese economy's "two lost decades." From the postwar period to the 1980s, the country's economy had been on the rise, with stable growth. People tended to desire material wealth, but then they had enough. Starting in the 1990s, people's interests began to turn to helping others in need as well as the environment, the arts and spiritual joy. I believe that was a huge turning point. Society had matured, and you could say the soul Japanese society once possessed had been revived.

What kinds of challenges is the social services sector facing?

In reality, half of all NPOs are social services. Especially in the nursing sector, with the population rapidly aging and the rise of the nuclear family, there is a lot the government and medical care can't cover. Until the Long-Term Care Insurance System was set up in 2000, in fact, NPOs did most of the work. In the beginning, practical services that supported everyday life were the norm, but nursing insurance secured the main parts of older people's lives, so the focus shifted to things like emotional support for older people living alone, such as helping them make friends or finding someone to talk to. The scope expanded.

What is the potential of Japan's NPOs and NGOs, and what is your view of the future?

Japan has nowhere near as many NPOs as the United States and Europe, and donations are still limited. Until now, Japan had a robust social security system, so it is primed for a greater awareness of self-help efforts to grow. However, there is also movement toward helping one another and deepening existing bonds. With social security predicted to be restricted, in the next decade Japanese NGOs could catch up to those of the West. I hope that people recognize what's going on and for support from NGOs to spread so that we can build a mature and livable society together. ▮