

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION IN THE SERVICE OF IMPROVING LIVING STANDARDS

The Valle del Yaqui Project

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ABSTRACT

The Yaqui of the Valle del Yaqui (Valley of the Yaqui) in the Sonoran Desert, in the State of Sonora Mexico, are one of the more culturally isolated groups in all of Mexico. Living in the midst of one of the economic “boom” states of the country, and only a few hours drive from the US states of Arizona and California, their economic and social situation nonetheless has deteriorated as a consequence of the economic growth of the surrounding region. Deprived of their traditional hunter/gatherer migratory patterns by the growth of large scale agriculture for the US marketplace, the Yaqui Indians have, for the most part, seen their standard of living and their social situation dramatically deteriorate. In response, a highly innovative Sonora wide public / private initiative has emerged, that, though founded to provide appropriate housing to the Yaqui, is also addressing their economic and social situation. PROVAY, the Comité de Promoción Social del Valle del Yaqui (the Committee for the Promotion of the Social Development of the Valley of the Yaqui), has created a populist campaign of the Yaqui, and non-Yaqui population, with collaboration from business, industry, and social organizations working in the valley. Using models developed in Asia of community-based social banks, and some of the most innovative technologies currently being proposed for strawbale building, the project has been able to help the Yaqui build their own economic and social capacity while attracting significant international funding (e.g. Inter-American Bank) that is acting in service of the projects priorities. This paper will explore, from the perspective of the foundation and development work, the ways in which this model was implemented and has successfully allowed the Yaqui to maintain their cultural/social values while developing their capacity to survive in this region that is rapidly transforming economically and socially.

PRACTICAL NPO ACTIVITIES CORRESPONDING TO THE SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN A SUBURBAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental factors for cultivating well-being in a changing suburban community will be discussed through NPO “Egao” (‘Egao’ means ‘a smiling face’ in Japanese) which was established in a typical residential town in Japan. Some proactive residents who have lived in this town since 1965 established the NPO Egao after continuous participatory activities to improve their community. An old terrace house that used to be used by small neighborhood shops was converted into an NPO office. The main functions are the private day service center for the elderly, the child support center with a library, and the culture center. The characteristic points are; 1) Informal support for the elderly to compensate for the lack of institutional public services for the elderly who wish to live at home. NPO Egao supports the caregivers as well as the elderly through counseling, and offers opportunities for children or spouses to accompany their elderly family members. 2) A well-coordinated network with Takurosho (a community-based multi-functional facility for people with dementia) helps to provide effective care for the first stage of dementia. 3) Recently, there are increasing cases in which old parents who have lived alone in rural areas are invited to live in their child’s home, or nearby. However, many of these newcomers experience transfer-shock. In these cases, NPO Egao functions as a mediator to introduce them to new friends in the community. 4) The library provides lending services and a reading class for small children and lectures for parents. 5) NPO Egao is carrying out informal and flexible services that aim to accomplish community building instead of a conventional welfare service. Nowadays, social problems range from care for the elderly to family relations. The practical activities of NPO Egao and the findings from them present the potential for a community solution.

INTRODUCTION

Needless to say, one of the biggest social problems in Japan is the unbalanced population ratio resulting from the combination of the rapidly increasing number of senior citizens and the decreasing number of youth. The field of welfare study is expanding widely and deeply with growing complicated problems influenced by recession, or family problems such as domestic violence, child abuse, etc. From this background, many specialists point out the importance of neighborhood relationship or community power for problem solving.

On the other hand, recently many volunteer groups have established NPOs (Non-Profit Organizations) for the purpose of compensating for insufficient public services, or developing community-based activities according to their missions. It may be true that NPO is expected to be a new force for the solution of community problems, which are one reflection of social circumstances.

In this paper, we discuss the case study of an NPO, “Egao,” that was established by neighborhood volunteers to accomplish their mission: the cultivation of well-being in their suburban community. The mission statement of NPO Egao is, “We will carry out neighborhood building (Machizukuri) in the aim of establishing a community in which all residents, from the elderly down, will be able to live affluent lives and feel relieved. We will contribute to the improvement of the social well-being of the community as a whole. In order to accomplish this goal, we will implement various projects concerning welfare and culture for all residents, including children and the elderly, through collaborative work and mutual understanding.”

This writer is a member of the board of directors for NPO Egao and has worked with these residents for 8 years as a researcher, as well as a volunteer. In this paper, various aspects of NPO Egao are described with the insight obtained through real experience as a co-worker, and at the same time analyzed objectively from the standpoint of a researcher.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESIDENTS

NPO “Egao” was established in 2000 after 35 years of continuous participatory activities aimed at the improvement of the quality of life in neighborhoods. The direct motivation was the desire to build a nursing home complex in their neighborhood, though their attempts to do so failed. However, their concept of community care remained strong, and eventually became NPO “Egao.” The town called Nagazumi was developed as the first suburban residential town in Fukuoka. From the cultural point of view, it is famous as the birthplace of the nationwide theatrical circle “Kodomo-gekijyo,” which provides cultural richness and a healthy spirit to children.

The core members of NPO Egao have always been proactive about building a better community. Their attitude is

summarized by the fact that they transferred their instinctive desires into social actions. Those 39 years are divided into 3 periods according to the character of their activities, following their life stage and social background.

This analysis is summarized in the diagram below.

Period	1965-1980s	1985-1990s	2000-2004
Life stage	Childcare	Caregivers of parents	Aging themselves
Object	Theatrical circle	Nursing facilities	NPO
Concern	Education	Social assets	Informal service
Product	Human network	Common values	Social capital

THE DISTINCTIVE POINTS OF NPO “EGAO”

When we examine the intermediary role of NPO Egao from an analytical point of view, they connect two different (sometimes opposite) characters of objects.

A) Formal - Informal

In general, one of the most important functions of an NPO is filling the void between the public and private sectors to accomplish a purpose. Among welfare systems, this model is more realistic than most others. Although well-being should exist primarily in people’s minds, we see many gaps between needs and welfare services. The service system works on the basis of contracts in both the public and private sectors, which produces a frame of limitations. On the other hand, users’ needs in their daily lives have no borders and cover a wide range. When we face this reality, we see that NPOs can play an important role in providing various services in a flexible manner, and responding to each need.

In Japan, after implementing the long-term care insurance system, the situation of care for the elderly has dramatically changed. This new system has many useful aspects. However, there exist some problems, such as potentially prohibitive costs for low-income people, limitations and regulations concerning home-helpers’ work, and the inadequacy of dementia certification, etc.

The fact that NPO Egao offers informal services for people with dementia, and is coordinated with the formal special service of Takurosho, which is a community-based multi-functional facility for dementia, is especially practical.

For example, one couple moved to Nagazumi from an island to live near their daughter's family. The husband had dementia and the wife had been suffering from the burden of caring for him. The problems become heavier because they had no acquaintances in the community. The daughter consulted with the staff, and NPO Egao worked to make links to the community for the couple. According to the formal service system, only the client may use the service, whereas, in this case, both the client and the caregiver started to attend the informal day service. The flexibility and hospitality of allowing caregivers to come along is a characteristic aspect of the day service provided by "Egao," a private service managed by volunteers. After a while, the husband started to use the Takurosho's special day care, his condition remarkably improved. As the couple became familiar with the community, the wife gradually became more optimistic about her own life. In other words, community-care networking between formal and informal services produced therapeutic results for people with dementia and improved the couple's quality of life.

B) Family - Facility (home care - institutional care)

Most people want to live out their lives at home. However, the accomplishment of this desire is not easy for several reasons, such as limitations of caregivers or family relations. In Nagazumi, there are two kinds of facilities, which are well coordinated with NPO Egao to support families. One is a nursing home complex with assisted-living and the other is Takurosho.

For example, one user of NPO Egao, a 98 year-old lady who lives in assisted-living, is a very independent person. When the woman's daughter learned of her mother's cancer, she wanted her mother to maintain the same conditions as long as possible. So, the NPO Egao staff coordinated a conference meeting with two facilities and families. As a result, the lady was allowed to live in the same assisted-living situation. In similar cases, most elderly people leave assisted-living and move to a hospital. In addition, nowadays she uses the NPO Egao day service with the support of her daughter. Also, Takurosho accepts the role of assisting NPO Egao and providing help in emergencies. Concerning those people who want to stay at home or in assisted-living in the same community, NPO Egao and Takurosho consult with their families about a supportive care system.

C) Newcomers - Old neighborhoods

Fukuoka is the most urbanized city in Kyushu, and the center of business, local politics, merchandise, education and culture. Many of the younger generations from peripheral rural towns have established new families in Fukuoka. As a result, old parents have had to stay by themselves. Recently, we have observed the phenomenon of those elderly people moving to Fukuoka to live nearby their children and families. However, it is very difficult for the older generation to become accustomed

to urban life. In addition, they cannot be optimistic about making new friends in the town. Although the community center provides cultural circles for the old to encourage social activities, newcomers often hesitate to get involved in established associations. Sometimes this transfer shock causes another family problems. In order to solve these problems, NPO Egao welcomes newcomers in their day services and connects them to the old members of the neighborhood. Once the newcomers feel the friendship of people from the same generation, they increase in vitality and establish new lives little by little. NPO Egao, based on the community and open to everybody, is able to fulfill this intermediary role.

D) Children - Elderly

One of the unique intergenerational programs at NPO Egao is the combination of a cooking class for children and eating together with the elderly. In this case, the teachers are elderly people who are healthy and active, while those who are over 80 years old and need more care are guests. Children learn how to cook traditional Japanese meals, which their mothers no longer cook, and also experience hospitality. As most families are nuclear families, children often do not have a chance to communicate with the older generation. This event is a very worthwhile experience for the children. On the other hand, the elderly people feel the happiness of social activities with children. At the same time, they are satisfied by the perception that they are included in the neighborhood activities.

The story telling parties for the elderly are popular among the participants. Although this is not a collaborative intergenerational activity, the idea comes from a unique organization targeted at both children and the elderly. Usually, story telling is common for small children who cannot read well. The old whose poor eyesight inhibits their reading pleasure are also comfortable listening to stories. One excellent aspect of story telling for the elderly is that they can share their feelings on the stories with friends in the circle.

A STUDY OF NPO EGAO IN TERMS OF STRENGTHENING THE FABRIC OF THE COMMUNITY

The following are the explanations of Figure 1.¹

NPO Egao is an important organization for strengthening the community fabric, which will create a new community context. Although NPO Egao is a newborn organization, the indigenous neighborhood has made it a resident-driven, active body. When we examine the meaning of NPO Egao in the community from an historical point of view, the following observations are seen in terms of social background, function of buildings and demographic change.

When people moved to the new suburb, Nagazumi, from surrounding areas, they were mostly nuclear families (typically composed of parents and 2 children). Most of the homeowners

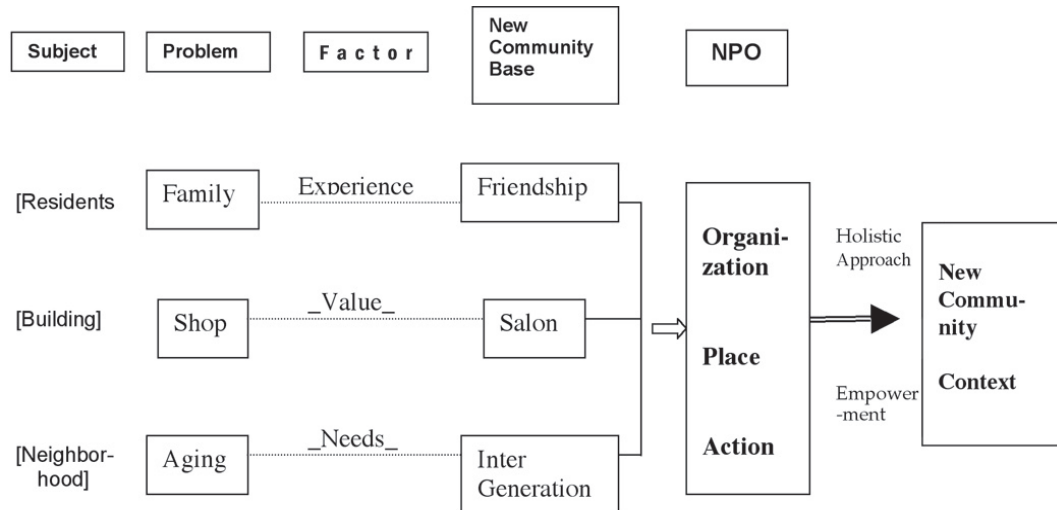


Figure 1. Diagram of relations and the flow to make components of NPO and future development.

were white-collar, salaried workers. Their children graduated from university and they did not return to the community after obtaining jobs. Only the old parents stayed in the community, and the parent-child tie has become weaker. As a result, friendship became more important than family relations for making safety networks for themselves.

NPO Egao's building is an old two-story terrace house composed of 3 parts. The first floor of it used to be used as a meat shop, cheap sweets and drinks shop and a barbershop. When supermarkets opened new stores in the community, these small shops experienced difficulties with management. After the shops closed they were just empty buildings for a while. The owner has a good understanding of the NPO's mission and lends it to them for cheap rent. Now, the first floor is a day service center and a community restaurant, and the second floor is a library for children and a culture room.

In order to see the building's change of function in regard to people's sense of value, we may refer to the fact that in general people recently prefer "mental satisfaction" to "possession of goods." When shops occupied the building, money and goods were the subject of exchange. Now, mutual communication and human contact are the main contents of the activities. The community restaurant sells meals and drinks, but people come there first to communicate with other customers, and second to eat. In this way it is a kind of salon for social exchange.

As mentioned before, when the Nagazumi community started, the residents were of similar family composition, and the average homeowner's age was from 35 to 45. Now, 39 years later, most of them are over 70 years old.

In order to empower these elderly groups, as well as the community itself, NPO Egao is making efforts to provide

opportunities for intergenerational activities. Formal welfare services are officially only for the older generation. However, NPO recognizes intergenerational needs. In other words, the older generation should be included in the whole community as an independent group. From this approach, they get energy through exchanging their feelings among other generations, and then they find well-being from inside themselves.

Other important activities connecting different generations are held in the Egao library. Elementary school children may drop in at the library on their way home every Wednesday to read or borrow books. Small children under 6-years-old come with their mothers and join the story telling class. Also, there is a class for mothers to learn the techniques of story telling. Children and mothers meet in these occasions and gradually make friends.

According to the above study, the new community base is composed of friends (friendship), salon (mutual communication) and intergenerational activities.

NPO Egao provides "organization," "place" and "action" for future development. NPO Egao stemmed from the volunteer-work of residents, and the staff is organizing many activities to develop friendship and collaborative works in the community. This organizational role covers not only activities within the NPO but also in the Nagazumi community as a whole.

"Place" is a key factor for expanding good relationships in the neighborhood. In this case, "place" does not only mean physical space. People accumulate experiences and emotional memories of the "place," and it can foster the mutual trust, the sharing of common values and happiness through face-to-face interaction.

In the case of evaluating NPO Egao from the viewpoint of the establishing process, it can be said that it is basically the

product of many years of social action. They continue to take further actions to solve occurring problems and to implement their mission.

Nowadays in Japan, many NPOs work as welfare offices for long-term insurance systems for the elderly, while NPO Egao implements distinct programs aiming at community building, and focusing on all generations' needs. These actions create momentum among the residents that will lead to community solutions.

When NPO Egao develops social actions, it takes a holistic approach to solving community problems. The fact that each phase is built on collaborative work reinforces the fabric of community context. In other words, it is an empowerment process.

In light of all the processes mentioned above, it follows that a new community context will be produced.

CONCLUSION

Through the case study of NPO Egao, the following characteristic points have been identified as important factors for the cultivation of environmental well-being in changing suburban communities.

• Start from awareness

Problems often exist behind small aspects of daily life. The question is whether or not people are aware of the fact that small problems often arise from deeper problems. The staff of NPO Egao have sharp observant eyes. Starting from awareness, the second point is how to interpret private matters as a part of the community's problems. As NPO Egao is a kind of community salon, there are lots of opportunities for information exchange. Even through simple chatting or gossip, sometimes realistic problems can be discovered.

• Holistic and open approach

Social problems have various complicated aspects. In order to reach the fundamental issue, the approach should be holistic. One of the catch-phrases of NPO Egao is "we are open for everyone." This describes their attitude of approach to the neighborhood as well as their hospitality.

• Solve the problem step by step

When we face problems, a superficial understanding will result in failure. In the staff meetings of NPO Egao, we discuss problems in detail and exchange opinions from diversified viewpoints. The solution process goes step by step, and takes time. Social problems concerning care for the elderly often relate to family problems. Understanding the background crucial for solving the problems requires detailed consideration.

• Accumulate experiences

Through continuous activities to achieve their aspirations, the staff has realized the value of social action. Events are accumulated as experience, as well as community assets. The realization that they could overcome the problems at hand becomes their confidence, and generates the energy to take a step forward. Starting from the theatrical circle activities for children, all experiences have been accumulated and added to the practices of NPO Egao.

• Evaluate in terms of people's minds

When it is time to make decisions the priority of the criteria becomes a key factor. One common understanding of NPO Egao is that the most important criterion should be in people's minds. How the people concerned accept the matter should be discussed both at the first and last phases of decision-making.

NPO Egao exists in the midst of continuous social change in the neighborhood. It always pays attention to the community assets and the characteristic background of Nagazumi. Their activities are woven into the community context and strengthen the human network.

In the future, there might be some unexpected social problem in the community. Even in that case, the five points mentioned above will be applicable, possibly with some modification. Each case will add to the unique growth and evolution of NPO Egao.

I would like to extend this study as a researcher as well as a practitioner of community building among residents.

ENDNOTES

¹ Notes to Figure 2: 1) In order to analyze the changing process, the residents, building and neighborhoods are placed as subjects in this study. 2) Social problems have occurred in the field of family relations (Family), commercial environment (Shop), and population composition Aging. 3) In the process of establishing NPO, residents have been influenced by some factors, such as their experience, a sense of value and social needs.