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Lifelong Learning in Tokyo
A Satisfying Engagement with Action Research in Japan

Akihiro Ogawa

ABSTRACT: This article presents an action research project, which I have been managing since 2001 in Tokyo, Japan. It is based on a non-profit organization (NPO), a group that promotes community-oriented lifelong learning, which was established under the 1998 NPO Law. Action research is a social research strategy, carried out by a team that includes a professional researcher and members of a community who are jointly seeking to improve their situation. This paper shows primarily how I have engaged with people at my field site, an NPO called SLG (pseudonym), and how we have produced knowledge to make changes to improve the quality of social life for more than ten years. I provide a narrative concerning recent developments at SLG in order to demonstrate how an action research project like this continually unfolds.

KEYWORDS: action research, civil society, co-generative knowledge production, ethnography, Japan, NPOs

Why Action Research?

Since September 2001, I have been managing an action research project at SLG (pseudonym), a lifelong learning group located in Kawazoe (pseudonym), in the eastern or traditional shiromachi district of Tokyo. My project has consisted of trying to solve actual problems we face at SLG, along with key research collaborators, in order to enhance the quality of our own organizational life. According to Greenwood and Levin (2007), action research can be defined as social research carried out by a team, which includes a professional action researcher and the other members of the organization, community or network (i.e. the ‘stakeholders’) whose aim is to improve the participants’ situation. It differs from conventional social science research because it engages ordinary people in the research process and ultimately supports ‘a more just, sustainable, or satisfying situation for the stakeholders’ (Greenwood and Levin 2007: 3). In other words, I understand action research as a style of co-generative knowledge production whereby researchers and other members of a community jointly (1) identify a problem, (2) gather information, (3) analyse the collected data, (4) plan for transformation, (5) take action, and (6) interpret the results for bettering the quality of social life through broad participation of the stakeholders in the research process. More simply, it is a cyclical process for problem solving.

In my project at SLG, I employed an action-research strategy to address the practical problems that arose in the participants’ daily struggles for social wellbeing. ‘Problems’ were defined as those issues the participants regarded as important, and the SLG members were the individuals charged with solving these problems. They formulated ideas, car-
ried out solutions, and learned from the research process. Meanwhile, as a professional researcher, I helped uncover problems and possibilities for change, mobilizing such ethnographic research techniques as participant observation, open-ended interviews, and document analysis, and ultimately recorded the research process as a book, The Failure of Civil Society? (Ogawa 2009).

Beginning with my research experience in graduate school, this paper primarily examines how I have engaged with the people at my field site and how we have jointly produced knowledge to achieve a better quality of social life for more than ten years now. I provide a narrative case concerning recent developments at SLG to demonstrate how an action research project like this continually unfolds, while SLG explores its organizational mission – promoting learning for local residents taught by other local residents. The action-research case explored in this paper concerns the operation of the local public planetarium, in which SLG had been involved for more than a decade as a collaborative project partner with the municipal government. The operation itself was very successful, as the facility was gaining great attention from various local populations. Owing to the austerity policy, however, the government decided to close the planetarium at the end of March 2012. The planetarium ‘crisis’ actually sent SLG members into action against the new policy, and gave them a chance to reflect on their daily activities.

It was a snowy December in 1999 when I first encountered action research. I was a second-year graduate student, and I was exploring a relevant method for developing my research project on Japanese society. At a main library in my university, I happened to pick up a book titled Introduction to Action Research (Greenwood and Levin 1998). It was the first time I had heard the term action research. I remember that the book’s subtitle – Research for Social Change – also sounded very attractive to me. I had already known exactly what I wanted to research for my graduate project: Japanese civil society. My scholarly interest was to explore the social and historical particularities of the Japanese meaning of ‘civil society’ or shinjin shakai – looking at how the concept is interpreted and practiced at the grassroots level. In particular, I wanted to look at the impact of the newly institutionalized civil-society sector called non-profit organizations (NPOs) on Japanese society in the late 1990s.

I had graduated from college in 1993, after which I was a journalist for five years in Japan. I covered many issues as a relatively new staff reporter at a major Japanese wire service, but what I found most impressive was the development of the civil society sector. The Hanshin Awaji earthquake, which hit Western Japan on January 17, 1995, generated a huge wave of disaster-relief volunteers. Statistics showed that 1.3 million volunteers visited the disaster site to aid victims (Economic Planning Agency 2000). The Japanese media called 1995 the borantia gunnen, or the ‘first year of volunteers’ in Japan. I was fortunate enough to cover this phenomenon as a member of the earthquake coverage team. Further, the volunteers’ impressive work prompted the Japanese government to ease rigid government control over the incorporation of third-sector or civil-society organizations and to make a law supporting the establishment of NPOs; in March 1998, the national diet passed the Law to Promote Specified Non-profit Activities, the popularly named NPO Law. Under this law, Japan began its institutionalization of civil society.

Japanese civil society has been viewed primarily as monolithic, with little delineation between the state and society, and as weak, co-opted by the state. Susan Pharr (2003: 324) argues that Japan is an ‘activist state’, by which she means that through funding and tax treatment, the state has successfully institutionalized specific kinds of civil society groups to achieve state ideology. Thus, at first, the emerging NPO sector itself might not be seen as anything new in the Japanese associational land-
scape. Nonetheless, I became particularly interested in illuminating how the Japanese, at the grassroots level, would respond to the state’s deliberate actions to institutionalize civil society, and what they would actually experience and feel during such a top-down process of moulding a civil society. I had a couple of specific research questions: Can civil society be successfully constructed by a state? What are the ways in which states seek to shape their relations with their populations, and how effective are policies designed for such a purpose likely to be?

Further, I perceived the Japanese NPO phenomenon to be a representation of global neoliberal politics. As social service delivery, formerly assumed by the welfare state, devolved to a range of civil society organizations like NPOs, the boundary between the state and civil society became much more porous. Conflicts within the ongoing Japanese NPO construction, I realized, could be presented as powerful narratives – real voices and real experiences against the state discourse on civil society, which needed to be vibrantly documented as a form of ethnography. In August 1998, I left journalism to start graduate school for exploring this emerging phenomenon in my own society.

At that time in my graduate programme on political science and public policy, I was mainly required to take the type of social science courses that lean heavily towards a number-oriented, rational-choice model. I felt strongly uncomfortable with this kind of knowledge production, however, and came to realize that I needed a different research paradigm. I had already established my own methods of data collection as a journalist: identifying sources, going to see people who were relevant to my research, having conversations with them, asking directly what I wanted to know, and documenting all of what I heard and observed. My writing always had a strong tendency to promote change. Meanwhile, honestly speaking, what I was required to learn in my graduate programme seemed like research for the sake of research, theory for the sake of theory. To me, a former journalist who knew about people’s complicated daily lives at the grassroots level through daily coverage, such research seemed like static knowledge production, which would have almost nothing to do with ordinary people in the real world.

Luckily enough, one of the authors of the book I had found was a professor of anthropology at my university. In the following spring, I enrolled in an introductory course on action research. The course did not have a pre-set syllabus. We learned how to facilitate group processes, how to set up and run a ‘search conference’ – the methodology for participatory planning and design. This method is a collective process of enquiry that creates learning options for all participants (Greenwood and Levin 2007: 144). We students learned all our skills by practising on the topics we chose; we were not lectured in a one-way manner (Greenwood 2012). In the middle of the semester, I began the process of transferring to the anthropology programme for studying this research strategy further. Since then, action research has become the core of my work. Once I decided to stop being a silent observer, I set off on a mission of action.

Civil Society in Which I Can Be Involved

Civil society is a public sphere that broadly refers to non-state institutions and associations that are critical to sustaining modern democratic participation. Civil society originally was a product of Western culture or an ethnocentric idea; it is a particular set of relationships between the state and either society or individuals in the West. On this point, Chris Hann (1996: 3) argues that civil society debates have been narrowly circumscribed by modern Western modes of liberal individualism (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Hearn
In the meantime, the concept has spread to other cultures. I would argue that each society and culture moulds its own version of civil society, reflecting its most important values, including individual liberty, public solidarity, pluralism, and nonviolence, all of which sustain a vibrant civic culture. Furthermore, the concept of civil society itself has been highly idealized, mostly among political scientists, who look at abstract, theoretical formulations or analyses of high-level political institutions. My anthropological research on civil society, by way of contrast, focuses not so much on the structural or political role of Japanese civil society but rather on exploring the everyday practices, cultural values and beliefs at the local level that are overlooked by other academic disciplines.

Thus, I contend that we anthropologists have been contributing information about crucial features of the construct of civil society all along. We have been actively documenting, as a form of ethnography, reciprocity and exchange, the elaboration of communal advantage, modes of affiliation and patterns of public participation — all of which are critical elements of civil society studies. Ethnography, which is what anthropologists do, is a powerful method because it employs open-ended, naturalistic inquiry and inductive reasoning to understand local perspectives. Through ethnography, we can contribute to the exploration of civil society that requires careful attention to a range of informal interpersonal practices, including the moral aspects of power, cohesion and social orders in contemporary civil societies (Hamm 1996: 3).

We anthropologists are indeed facing ‘civil society’s need for de-construction’ (Bentham 2000: 1). Having said that, I understand civil society to be an active, dynamic process, in which I myself can be involved, rather than a static abstract model. This understanding was a major reason I chose action research as my key research strategy. My research aim is not to argue about what civil society is but to discover what civil society does. Since I joined a lifelong learning group in downtown Tokyo, referred to here as SLG, I have been seeking to improve the members’ organizational life — with their participation. Our interaction does not consist merely of simple knowledge transference from my side. Instead, we jointly produce knowledge for making changes within the organization to support ‘a more just or satisfying situation for the stakeholders’ (Greenwood and Levin 2007: 3). In fact, central to my research is a method advocated by public anthropology that ‘takes us away from a solely enquiry-based methodology and towards one that is dialogic and change oriented’ (Beck 2009: 1). Going beyond means-end analysis also allows the examination of reflexive loops in ethnography, making my own self-existence more apparent. As a form of ethnography, which is my academic work as a researcher, I document what is happening at my field site as well as how I engage in the activities, aiming to reveal a different picture of social and political life in Japan from the grassroots up instead of from the perspective of political elites, and inevitably involving myself in the process.

**Encounters with SLG**

SLG is at a local public lifelong learning centre in Kawazoe, which was established by the ward government in the early 1990s. SLG was incorporated as a community-oriented lifelong learning NPO in September 2000 under the 1998 NPO Law, just a year before I entered the field site. SLG offers nearly 100 individual courses to local residents per year, targeting local aging populations in particular. The courses include liberal arts subjects, foreign languages, sports, after-school activities for kids, music, and fine arts. Around 2,000 local people register for the courses every year, and the majority of course participants, or 60 per cent, are women over 50 years of age. Further, SLG is one of the biggest NPOs promoting
lifelong learning in Japan, in terms of both the membership and the budget scale. Every year, some 130 people register as volunteers, all of whom are members with voting rights at the annual general meeting. The majority of these volunteers are housewives and retired men. The volunteers plan lifelong learning courses, attend the courses in order to help course participants’ learning, and also collect and provide information on learning opportunities to local residents via the Internet, local cable TV, and newsletters. Meanwhile, SLG has twenty-two secretariat staff members (as of 30 September 2012), who are mainly in charge of administrative work. SLG annually spends some 100 million yen for its operation.

Dennis Young classified NPOs into three categories in terms of their relationship with the government: those that (a) operate independently as supplements to the government, (b) work as complements to the government in a partnership relation, or (c) are engaged in an adversarial relationship of mutual accountability with the government (Young 2000). SLG can be categorized within group (b) because the ward government led the institutionalization of NPO and has maintained a significant level of control over the organization. Originally, the local government responded to a national initiative – the enactment of the law for the promotion of lifelong learning in 1990, which was designed to provide for Japan’s aging society. In fact, Japan is one of the most greying societies in the world. The government then created a public facility promoting lifelong learning activities in the local community. However, after the asset-inflated ‘bubble’ economy ended in the early 1990s, the government could not finance the public facility; thus, they organized – or I would say, ‘invited’ – local residents in 1993 to volunteer for operating the public lifelong learning centre and maintained a relationship with the volunteers (Ogawa 2004). After the NPO Law of 1998 was enacted, the ward government told the group that it should incorporate as an NPO, demonstrating what I describe as a government-led, top-down process of NPO-ization (Ogawa 2009). In September 2000, SLG registered as an NPO under the 1998 NPO Law. Some NPOs, like SLG, were indeed established by local governments; they viewed NPOs as a convenient cost-saving means to deliver social services that the state could no longer afford to provide. Subcontracting with NPOs enabled the government to provide the same social service at a lower cost through the mobilization of community volunteers.

Although the government has succeeded in cutting costs by sponsoring social service delivery NPOs, they are, to a significant degree, co-opted by the state because they are dependent on state funding. SLG’s relationship with the government, for example, continued after it obtained NPO status. The SLG president remained a government appointee, and SLG continued to receive most of its funding from the ward government. Further, I would say that SLG is one of a type that is most prevalent among NPOs in Japanese civil society. Many NPOs are quasi-public, like SLG, especially in social welfare and lifelong learning. The Asahi Shimbun, a major daily newspaper, called these NPOs ‘GoNPOs’ or government-led NPOs (2009). According to the Cabinet Office’s research from 2008, about 55 per cent of Japanese civil society organizations’ revenues are from their various projects with the government, 28 per cent from government subsidies, 5 per cent from donations, and 5 per cent from membership fees (Cabinet Office 2008). Thus, I believe SLG provides us with a great case study on the state-led institutionalization of civil society.

From 2001 to 2003, I was working at SLG as an unpaid secretariat staff member in charge of developing lifelong learning courses and coordinating volunteers. This period coincided with my intensive fieldwork as a doctoral student. Since 2004, then, I have been involved as a volunteer. I recognized that my dissertation project would be just the beginning of my long-term action research, and it is still continuing.
Looking back over the past twelve years, I believe one of the most important things in developing this kind of action research project is to find research collaborators. As mentioned earlier, action research is a collaborative process of producing knowledge, which should be directly used for improving the stakeholders' situation. My research collaborators and I have jointly developed the research process; I believe this is an experience that builds up 'trust', one key aspect of an ethnographer's — that is, my own — way of experiencing life, as James Peacock points out (2001: 137).

In the initial stage of my research, I tried to facilitate the process primarily by taking a strong initiative. However, I expected that my role could be gradually transferred to my research collaborators, and I did successfully accomplish that. Most people at my field site apparently did not understand my intention. I was expected to be the conventional, silent researcher. However, such a role was not what I expected. Whenever I had a chance, I tried to talk directly about my research mission to the would-be collaborators. I talked about why I would do this type of research, touching upon my own experience as a journalist, without using any academic jargon. Some of them understood my research well, and as stakeholders, they helped establish my research. I have kept at least five collaborators inside SLG and three outside for my continuing project over the past decade.

**SLG Ten Years Later**

In summer 2012, I visited SLG for the first time in a year. Compared to a decade ago, I would say that many volunteers and secretariat staff have been replaced, and new people have joined. The majority of new volunteers are people who have recently retired — from Japan's first generation of baby boomers, born between 1947 and 1949. They were coming back to their local communities, and SLG became a place for them. The total number of volunteers has not changed much, though. Another difference is that SLG's neighbourhood is becoming a sightseeing spot in Tokyo. Just a couple of kilometres away from SLG's building, the Tokyo Sky Tree, the tallest freestanding tower in the world, was built in 2012. The formerly traditional Tokyo neighbourhood is becoming one of the most popular tourist destinations in Japan.

One major problem that SLG now faces is actually related to the Sky Tree tower. The Sky Tree opened a planetarium with state-of-the-art technology that is operated by a major Japanese camera manufacturer. Meanwhile, SLG also had a planetarium attached to the lifelong learning centre in which SLG was housed. It had been operated by SLG under a yearly contract with the ward government since April 2002 when I was a secretariat staff member. This type of collaboration, popularly called *kyodo* in Japanese, between NPOs and the government in policy making and implementation has been a fashionable administrative technique since the enactment of the 1998 NPO Law. Such policymaking intends to facilitate successful, effective policy implementation while achieving cost cutting.

The SLG planetarium was very old, one of the few public planetarium facilities left in central Tokyo. I visited several times and left with the impression that it was very cosy with a good atmosphere. SLG volunteers took responsibility for creating the learning programmes projected in the planetarium. As part of their science classes at school, third-grade students in Kawazoe and its neighbourhood municipalities regularly visited the planetarium, and SLG volunteers, mostly the elderly, handled the logistics for their visits. The SLG planetarium thus offered an important place for exchanges among generations in the local community. One of the volunteers who took leadership in coordinating the projection programme, a retired scientist, told me that she was happy doing this volunteer work because
she enjoyed nurturing the local children’s curiosity in the universe.

However, in August 2012, the ward government suddenly told SLG that they would no longer continue the entrustment contract, starting in April 2013 with the beginning of the next fiscal year. The end of the contract simply meant that the SLG planetarium would likely be forced to close because of a financial deficit. The SLG volunteers were surprised, and some were even angry because the planetarium operation had gone smoothly without any major trouble. Some, on the other hand, had anticipated that this would happen someday. They knew that the planetarium facility was old, having been built more than two decades ago, and that some parts would not be available when the inevitable breakdowns would begin to occur. The government had already told SLG that they did not have enough money to replace it.

I had a chance to talk to one government official about the government decision. He pointed out to me the opening of the new planetarium attached to the Tokyo Sky Tree. The Sky Tree is located one subway station away from SLG, and it takes only 15 minutes to go there on foot. Under this situation, the old SLG planetarium was not likely to get many general visitors. The government was also considering transferring the third-grade students’ regular visit to the new Sky Tree planetarium. Further, operating the old planetarium was costly: the total of 42 million yen spent for operating costs in 2011 included 20 million yen of personnel expenses for four staff members, 17 million yen for maintenance, and the rest for taxes and miscellaneous. ‘We are not eligible to say anything against the government’s decision’, the president of SLG told the volunteers. His rationale stemmed from the fact that SLG is a business partner with the government under the annual entrustment contract. ‘If the government says no, we just follow the decision’. The president’s logic was supported by the general secretary of SLG, a former government official who took his current post after his retirement, and by the ‘invited’ volunteers, who are still powerful as core members of the current SLG volunteers.

Others, however, saw it differently. ‘Since I am a tax payer, a user of this planetarium, and also a resident of this ward, there are reasons to say something against the government’s decision’, one SLG volunteer responded to the president’s comment. Indeed, a solid number of people were against the president’s stance. The leader of this camp was Mr. Iwata, one of my key research collaborators since 2001, who had become a director of SLG in 2009. The two of us are of the same generation, and I have developed a good relationship with him over the past ten years. I joined this camp with him.

In order to formulate a strategic response to the president’s logic, Mr. Iwata and I attempted to form a network group for jointly generating knowledge to improve this difficulty that SLG faced. Our network was diverse: it included Mr. Harada, a former SLG president; Mrs Taka-mori, a former SLG vice president; and two government officials who played a significant role in establishing SLG and supporting the SLG activities, in addition to SLG volunteers and local residents who wanted planetarium operations to continue. Meanwhile, we developed an email list for sharing information and organizing ideas because of events that had placed limitations on our ability to communi-cate physically. Mr. Iwata, an engineer in a mobile phone company, was transferred to Osaka in May 2012, even though he was still a director of SLG and often came to Tokyo, and Mrs Takamori needed to be at home to take care of her 90-year-old mother. Thus, email exchange was a realistic way for most of us to communi-cate for the time being. Meanwhile, Mr. Iwata and I (because I am a researcher with relative flexibility, compared to the others) arranged several direct meetings with the research collaborators to augment our email communication. The mailing list included some thirty stakeholders in this issue.
New Possibilities Explored

First of all, in our email exchanges, we confirmed that a main goal was to protect the employment of SLG’s paid staff members who were in charge of the planetarium operation. We considered several ideas: Would it be possible to start up a new business by using the current (though old) planetarium facility? Or, could we cut costs to generate salaries for the current staff members? SLG had hired four staff members for the planetarium operation, but one of them was scheduled to leave in March 2013 for personal reasons. Thus, we needed to think about the salaries for the three remaining staff members, which meant we needed to generate 15 million yen (5 million yen × 3) per year. One suggestion that came from the mailing list was to review current actual costs. For example, we found that SLG was spending 10 million yen per year in publication costs for its monthly newsletter. Someone on the email list proposed that if we were to publish the paper bimonthly instead of monthly, the cost would be halved, leaving enough to fund one person. We performed other similar calculations with the rest of the budget.

As we worked, our anger toward the government was amplified. We realized that the SLG planetarium operation had been a collaboration between citizens and the government. One network member said,

This is not a simple business contract or an administrative thing. I don’t think we volunteers are expected by the government to make a lot of money through the SLG planetarium operation. If they wanted money, they could make an entrustment contract with for-profit corporations, instead of non-profit corporations like us.

Yet another volunteer said, ‘Volunteers played a significant role in developing citizens’ activities in the local community. If the planetarium were closed, we would lose a key place for volunteering in the local community’. Our conversation gave us a good chance to reflect on the position of planetarium volunteers within SLG. Because these volunteers required special skills and training in handling the facility, they did not interact with other SLG volunteers in the daily operation. In fact, the planetarium volunteers were relatively young, compared to other volunteers at SLG, and they were very interested in science and space. Further, some of the current planetarium volunteers pointed out that their tasks had to be limited to entrustment-related work and activities. However, the planetarium volunteers belonged to the Planetarium Operation Department, an independent department within SLG that was not part of the government. Thus, they could create something new. They could collaborate with other SLG volunteers and could plan lifelong learning courses—the main business of SLG. For example, they could create some courses that would use the dome-shaped facility (or the planetarium). It would also be a nice place for music concerts. Some even proposed that the planetarium could be used as a wedding hall. A completely new business for SLG was a possibility.

Mission Re-confirmed

While exploring several new prospects, one of our network members, Ms Miyabe, who was the SLG director in charge of planetarium operation, had a chance to talk to a planetarium user. The user, who was visiting the SLG planetarium with her small children, already knew that the planetarium might be abolished. She asked Ms Miyabe, ‘What will happen to current users like us if the SLG planetarium is closed?’ Ms Miyabe responded, ‘You might want to go to the Sky Tree planetarium ...’. To this, the user responded, ‘No. What you mean is that the opportunity [to visit the new planetarium] will be guaranteed, but the quality [the SLG planetarium provides to the local user] would not be guaranteed’. Ms Miyabe conveyed this conversation to the members of the mailing list, startling all of us into the
realization that, in a sense, we had forgotten our real mission.

In sum, ten years after SLG had been established, the organization itself may have matured, but the reality was that we had begun to forget our mission as the NPO that we (in a strict sense, the former SLG volunteers, as most of us were relatively new) had created in 2000. The original mission of SLG was to create learning for local residents that would be taught by the local residents themselves. Our network members were driven mainly by the original logic in terms of staff members’ employment, volunteering opportunities, cost-benefit analysis, organization, money, etc. However, we should have realized that the users would be the most troubled following the government’s decision on the SLG planetarium. The users were local residents – in particular, elementary school students. Thus, we started to reflect upon what kind of learning the local residents had themselves created and what kind of learning programmes we offered to the local residents as users in the planetarium. We then listed what SLG offered to our users, and our list highlighted the differences between our planetarium and the commercial one, as follows:

- Our learning projection is always conducted by trained specialists (staff members), and a Q & A session follows the projection. SLG volunteers assist at the projection, including the content making, and facilitate the Q & A session. Interaction always occurs between our specialists and the users. Such personal attention is never expected in a commercial planetarium, which is usually like a movie theatre.
- Our specialists have developed a strong network with science teachers at the local elementary school and can respond to any request from the local teachers in a flexible manner. In other words, the projection content is flexible, able to be modified based on both students’ learning needs and teachers’ request. We also offer a special projection program to the students who are going to summer camp so that they are well prepared for what they will experience.
  - On all occasions, SLG volunteers always assume full responsibility for offering these services with the trained specialists.

This list demonstrates that SLG was greatly contributing to the public welfare in the local community through the volunteers’ personal care, which was not often achieved through the monotonous social services delivery by the government or any commercial operators intending to do it to make money.

About the same time we made this list in September, Mr Harada, the former president of SLG, and three SLG volunteers sat in on the education committee meeting of the ward assembly. Asked about the entrustment contract with SLG for the planetarium operation, Ms Kaneta, head of the lifelong learning section on the Board of Education, responded,

I understand that it is not necessary to have the learning projection for all of our school children because that is not defined in the current teaching guideline made by the education ministry. However, students in this ward can continue to see the project at the Sky Tree, and we could arrange it if there is a demand from our local schools. But, I don’t think we need to take care of the students from our neighbouring wards, although the SLG planetarium is currently accepting them. That is not our responsibility since they are coming from outside [of this ward].

Mr Harada and SLG volunteers were annoyed with this comment, which was made by a young bureaucrat who had been dispatched to the ward government from the Tokyo Metropolitan government. As SLG people, we believed it was our responsibility as adults to make sure that children, regardless of where they were from, are not disadvantaged. It was
apparent that the quality of service would deteriorate if this policy were carried out. Instead, we believed that we should develop a user-centred approach, or, in this case, a child-centred approach. That is what we could offer; meanwhile, the government was looking only at the cost-benefit analysis. Since our establishment, we had made serious efforts to offer benefits to local users as the goal of our daily operations. If the new planetarium option were to provide the same content as SLG does at a cheaper price, nobody would complain. However, clearly this was not going to be the case. The cost itself is probably less because the government will pay only a discounted group-entrance fee for the Sky Tree planetarium with no additional costs, such as personnel fees; but the service content itself would not be the same. Nobody would respond to children’s questions, for example.

What the ward government was doing went against the ten-year achievement that SLG and the government had jointly produced. Even though it did, indeed, cost a certain amount of money, our work was in line with our mission – that local residents themselves would create learning for local residents. In my previous work (Ogawa 2009), I had located Japanese NPOs or ‘civil society’ as a form of agency in neoliberalism, a dominant ideology in contemporary global politics and economies. When such small government ideology was expanding to the local level, the government took advantage of the 1998 NPO Law when, for example, the ward government actively transferred or pushed what was originally the government’s job to SLG under the name of cost cutting. A decade later, the situation had changed: the government seemed to be transferring the job from the civil society organizations to commercial-based entities, which are even cheaper and can develop more business-like relations. In this process, the meaning SLG volunteers had found in the policy collaboration with the government was never discussed.

Toward the Next Cycle

In early October 2012, the government finalized the budget for the next fiscal year (starting April 2013), and officially decided to end the enslavishment contract with SLG on the planetarium operation, which means the loss of more than 40 million yen for SLG. However, the government told SLG that they could use the planetarium facility if they wanted to pay for it because SLG had developed their own content for the planetarium projections. Further, for the time being – for only a year – the government will pay for SLG to employ the three staff members currently in charge of planetarium operations. During this period, SLG will be able to build up a new business strategy for the planetarium.

Following our discussion, which occurred primarily via email exchanges, several new developments happened at SLG. First, SLG volunteers began to consider possibilities for a new business with the current planetarium staff members. Further, several relatively new volunteers who were on the mailing list, such as Mr. Asada and Mrs. Nakata, took a leadership role in building a study group within SLG. This study group intends to review the history of SLG – why SLG was established as an NPO and what we can and should pursue. In other words, the study group will directly address SLG’s mission. Mr. Iwata, my research collaborator, also took part in this effort. I was not involved with this development at all, however. I was just an observer.

The first study group meeting, which I attended, was held in mid-October. The group invited Mrs. Tasaka, a retired government official and former director of the lifelong learning department in the ward government. She had played a significant role in establishing SLG in the late 1990s. Mrs. Tasaka was also on our mailing list, and she was very supportive of us, giving insider’s knowledge about the government’s decision making. Mrs. Tasaka reconfirmed the SLG mission – creating learning
for local residents by the local residents themselves. Although I have described SLG as the direct result of government-led NPO-ization (Ogawa 2009), it was also a collaborative project by local residents and some government officials like Mrs Tasaka (I would say, in particular, pro-citizens’ activities officials). Having such support from within the government, the volunteers at SLG have actively developed the organization’s unique learning activities based on their mission. Such a style sounds unique because civil society organizations should be viewed as being independent of the state. However, since its establishment in 2000, this is the style that SLG, one of the biggest Japanese NPOs promoting lifelong learning, has been pursuing as a citizen-based group deeply embedded in the local community. This collaborative style, which might be called ‘GoNPO’, is a major feature of Japanese NPOs.

One volunteer who attended the study group pointed out, ‘Because we do not share our mission among us, our activities sometimes lose direction. I am worried that people outside SLG can’t understand what we are doing’. Indeed, the planetarium case has provided a great opportunity for SLG (as well as the government) to reflect on their organizational history, business strategy, and learning program. As a specific next step, Mrs Tasaka actually proposed that SLG make a mid-term (3–5) year plan; the task should definitely aim to re-confirm or re-generate their mission through the evaluation of the current activities.

When I left SLG at the end of my visit, I had a chance to talk with Mr Aota, the current SLG president, over a cup of coffee. He was a vice-president when I was a secretariat staff member. Mr Aota and I shared a sense of crisis concerning the current situation at SLG, especially after the planetarium incident. Our conversation ended with a plan to create a dynamic, participatory evaluation process of our own activities at SLG for 2015 – the fifteenth anniversary of SLG’s establishment. We considered a diverse group of people who could participate in the evaluation process, including SLG current and former volunteers, former and current government officials, SLG former and current directors and secretariat staff members, local users, and so on. Thus, our action research project at SLG never ends; the next cycle of research has already begun.

Over the past decade, I committed myself to action-oriented social research through democratization of knowledge in research and practice. Actually, my key interest as a researcher is to enhance peoples’ grassroots access to the public policy agenda, and in order to understand what access people have, I must know the relationship between the state and the individuals. In other words, I must have a clear picture of civil society. Meanwhile, in studying the emerging civil society in Japan, what made ethnography most attractive was that it facilitated the inclusion of diverse voices. As George Marcus (1998: 66) reminds us, ‘voices are not seen as products of local structures, based on community and tradition, alone, or as privileged sources of perspective, but rather as products of the complex sets of associations and experiences which compose them’. By documenting such voices, I believe my ethnography can function as a public witness and provide a record for our times, by adding timely policy narratives and testing the relevance of anthropological investigation in policymaking. In fact, my research on Japanese civil society presents a pivotal moment when a country is moulding civil society in an intensive manner, including the frustration and disagreement against such changes. We anthropologists can make a powerful statement against the state dominant discourse, presenting local voices and experiences.

As a researcher, the products I primarily seek are ethnographies on contemporary Japan. However, I hope that my work transcends such strictly defined goals. My long-standing interest in civil society has been motivated not only by academic curiosity but also by my desire as a citizen to examine the grassroots of,
and possibilities for, social reform in contemporary societies. I have eagerly engaged in ways to empower ordinary people at my field sites by capturing their grassroots voices. Thanks to action research, my research project has contributed to a series of changes that improved the members’ organizational lives at SLG. Even if they were small changes, I could confirm that my research was at least socially relevant in a concrete manner, and it was such involvements that made me continue this kind of research. The involvement with real-world issues gives me the meaning of being a researcher.

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