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Social Capital in Japan's Aging Society

Japan's population is aging and shrinking at unprecedented speed. One central issue that emerges in the ongoing discourse on how to meet the manifold demographic challenges Japan faces, deals with the central role the nation's senior citizens can take on when it comes to providing and fostering social capital. The concept of lifelong learning in this context has been established as a central means of being engaged in actively shaping the future of Japan.

1. Introduction

Population aging and shrinking is one of the central challenges Japan and other industrialized nations face today. Particular about Japan, however, is the unprecedented speed in which demographic change occurs. All three demographic variables show extreme figures for Japan: The total fertility rate (TFR) in Japan stands at 1.32 children per woman – well below the OECD average of a 1.65 TFR. Japan's life expectancy of 82.4 years, on the other hand, significantly surpasses the OECD average of 79.0 years (cf. NIPSSR 2008; cf. OECD 2009a). With the third demographic variable, migration flows, Japan again proves to be an outlier case, i.e. an industrialized nation with virtually no immigration occurring. While the foreign population's share among the overall population of Japan amounts to a mere 1.7 percent, it, for example, stands at 5.8 percent in the United Kingdom, at 8.2 percent in Germany, and at 10.3 percent in Spain (cf. MoJ 2009; cf. OECD 2009b).

Developing and implementing measures that address all three variables, which contribute to population aging and shrinking, is a main challenge confronting Japanese governments. Under the impact of the enormity of the task, politicians came to demand citizens' participation in addressing the new challenges, for example, by providing social services to the increasing number of elderly via neighborhood associations or other voluntary groups (cf. Vogt 2008, 25–27). It is in this context that “social capital” became a popular concept in Japan: It is widely sought after by the political elite as a means of, in particular, managing the rising costs of social services, and it is willingly delivered by citizens, in particular senior citizens, who pursue the creation of new social networks after retirement from their professional lives. In this sense social capital can simultaneously be a “‘private good’ and a ‘public good’” (Putnam 2000, 20).

This paper will show how lifelong learning contributes to the creation of social capital in Japan. It will be argued that there are two dimensions inherent in lifelong

learning (*shōgai gakushū*) practices in Japan.⁴ Lifelong learning fosters the social dimension of social capital through community-based and community-oriented activities, administered by, for example, neighborhood associations. It also fosters the economic dimension of social capital via, for example, senior citizens' work agencies and senior citizens' involvement in social movement activities – all of which also provides structures for a knowledge spillover from the economic to the communal sector. Before addressing these two dimensions, the paper will provide some introductory information on the dimensions of Japan's population aging, thereby painting the background against which the current discourse on citizens' involvement in public life proceeds. Also, the historic development and current structure of lifelong learning in Japan will be introduced, preceded by some theoretical thoughts on the concept of social capital.

2. Japan's aging society

The year 2005 marks a turning point in Japan's population development. In 2005, Japan entered a period of negative population growth, i.e. the absolute number of deaths surpassed that of births and net-migration combined. The Japanese population has started to shrink. It is predicted to drop from its 2004 peak (127.768 million) to 119.270 million by 2025, and to 95.152 million by 2050. Forty years from now, Japan's population will have shrunk to three quarters of that of its peak year⁵. In addition to its decline, Japan's population also faces a rapid aging process. The old-age dependency ratio, i.e. the ratio of the population aged 65 years and over to the ratio of the working age population (15–64 years), is predicted to rise from 30.5 percent in 2005 to 51.2 percent by 2025, and to 76.4 percent by 2050 (cf. NIPSSR 2008). The effects of population aging and shrinking on the nation's social security system in particular will be tremendous. Political countermeasures to this development will need to imply rising retirement age, downgrading pension payments and cutting health-care services (cf. Estevéz-Abe 2008; cf. Ikegami/Campbell 2007). The impact will, however, go way beyond the social security aspects alone and also affect Japan's society, culture, politics and economics in manifold ways (cf. Coulmas et al. 2008). Japan is confronted with major necessary changes that will challenge the nation to its core.

3. Lifelong learning and the formation of social capital

This paper draws on the understanding of “social capital” as shaped by James S. Coleman and Robert D. Putnam. Coleman argues that “social capital is defined by its

4 The Japanese term *shōgai* has a positive connotation and refers to “lifetime” in the meaning of “lifetime career” or “lifetime friendship”. The term *gakushū* is very close to the English equivalent of “learning” as opposed to “education”, and refers to a comprehensive development of one's personality.

5 The shrinking of Japan's population continues. Data for 2009 show that the speed of the numerical decline has even accelerated (cf. The Japan Times 2010/04/17).

function” (Coleman 1988, 98). Furthermore, social capital is “productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (ibid.). Putnam develops this definition further when he argues that “‘social capital’ refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1995, 67). Putnam perceives social capital as holding inherent two dimensions. Social capital is understood as something physical such as a “network”, but it also comprises the essence of the “network” itself, namely “norms, and social trust” (ibid.).

Lifelong learning contributes to the formation of both dimensions of social capital: Firstly, it draws people together physically, for example, to a community center, where some form of communal learning occurs. Secondly, over time, it also fosters the creation of a set of norms and social trust within the group of citizens involved, and even beyond the physical boundaries of this network. Both the physical and the creational dimension contribute to the development and strengthening of the social and economic aspects of social capital. Before turning to the study of these aspects for the case of Japan, a brief overview over the development of lifelong learning in Japan shall be given.

3.1 Lifelong Learning in Japan – an Overview

In 1872, during the Meiji Era (1868–1912), Japan’s national Education Order was promulgated marking the start of tremendous educational efforts, which were directed toward the goal of catching up with the scientific “advances made by the USA and other western countries” (Kawanobe 1994, 485). While school education and social education were formally considered as complementary, “school education has been regarded as the main stream” (ibid.). Only in the post-war years, under US occupation, social education was boosted. In 1949, the Social Education Law (*shakai kyōiku hō*) was enacted. The Law acknowledges lifelong learning as a “legal right of the Japanese people” (Ogawa 2009, 603p.). Facilities such as “citizens’ public halls, libraries, museums” (Kawanobe 1994, 485) were created. Under the impact of the United Nations’ 1960s and 1970s initiatives to boost lifelong learning, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture⁶ drafted a series of papers suggesting how to implement the United Nations’ initiatives in Japan.

It was, however, not until 1990 that under the Ministry’s direction the Law for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning (*shōgai gakushū shinkō hō*) was enacted. The White Paper on Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture of 1991 describes the outline of government policies which lead to the enactment of the Law for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning as follows:

6 This is the predecessor to today’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

If our nation is to build up a society which is rich and dynamic enough to face the challenges of the 21st century, people must be provided with opportunities for participating in learning throughout life at any time they like, in accordance with their needs (MEXT 1991).

The Education Ministry attempted to utilize the concept of lifelong learning in order to create a broad and vibrant pool of social capital within the communities, bearing in mind the need to prepare the nation for the challenges of the new millennium.

Demographic change is not explicitly mentioned as one of the looming challenges. 1990, the year the Law was enacted, also was, however, the year of the so-called “1.57 shock” when “the total fertility rate for the previous year fell to a post-war low (i.e. TFR 1.57)” (Coleman 2008, 749). The year 1990 thus not only marks the start of comprehensive lifelong learning policies, but also of family policy initiatives such as the Angel Plans⁷ (cf. Coleman 2008, 750–760) directed toward boosting the fertility rate and countering population aging and shrinking which came to be acknowledged as one of the major challenges Japan would face in the new millennium.

The initiatives under the Law for the Promotion of Lifelong Learning must in retrospective be evaluated as not overly successful – it should be acknowledged, however, that they may have laid some grounds for a long-term evolvement of a very positive attitude toward lifelong learning prevalent among many citizens in Japan. The immediately suggested policy measures such as holding lifelong learning festivals and creating “intelligent facilities”, i.e. facilities “which are comprehensive (...) rich and comfortable” (MEXT 1991), may have brought pleasure and enjoyment to the communities; there remains doubt, however, whether these measures managed to significantly enhance lifelong learning itself and/or foster the creation of social capital. Also, the implementation of the policy initiatives remained largely at the discretion of local public bodies on the prefectural and the municipal levels, where significant lacks in coordinating activities – and a lack of budget – hampered their systematic promotion (cf. Kawanobe 1994, 489p.).

With the turn of the millennium – and the proceeding demographic crisis obvious to the public and to political actors alike – lifelong learning initiatives were intensified. This time, as this paper argues, the initiatives were in particular directed to fostering social capital, i.e. to creating networks as well as norms and social trust, all of which would help to establish social and economic bulwarks against a decline in (working-age) population and the looming crumbling of the welfare state. Eventually, in 2006, the concept of lifelong learning was added to the Fundamental Law of Education (kyōiku kihon hō), which Ogawa (2009, 601) deems “Japan’s educational charter”.

7 The Angel Plans are Japan’s first post-war policy initiative directed to boosting the fertility rate. Since their policy goal – population growth – is in accordance with Japan’s pre-war “umeyo fuyaseyo” (give birth and multiply) policy, they are to some degree contentiously debated (cf. Schoppa 2008, 639–640).

The Education Ministry's current outline of its philosophy on "Lifelong Learning and Social Education" names the following four points necessary to Japan in order to "create a lifelong learning society" (c.f. MEXT 2010), again stressing the importance of fostering social capital within the communities:

1. the need to remedy Japanese society's preoccupation with academic credentials,
2. increased demand for learning activities in a developing society,
3. the need for learning in response to social and economic change,
4. the need to revive and improve the educational strengths of the home and the local community (c.f. MEXT 2010).

Today "more than 40 million people – about one third of the Japanese population – actively participate in some form of activity related to learning" (Ogawa 2009, 601p.). Activities comprise, for example, of "learning opportunities related to the liberal arts, sports, fine arts, foreign languages (...). Japan's lifelong learning is primarily argued as being a cultural model" (Ogawa 2009, 602). In other words, lifelong learning in Japan is largely directed to community building via creating opportunities for citizens to engage in cultural activities, such as studying a foreign language together. The following paragraphs shall pose the question as to which degree social and economic dimensions of social capital building are in fact results of Japan's "cultural model" of lifelong learning.

3.2 The social dimension of social capital

How do social networks and their inherent norms and social trust work? How does social capital shape community building activities on a local level? And how, in return, do communities contribute to the further development of social capital?

In accordance with one of the central points the Education Ministry mentions in its current report on "Lifelong Learning and Social Education", i.e. "the need to revive and improve the educational strengths of (...) the local community" (cf. MEXT 2010), this study focuses on the creation of social capital on a communal level in Japan. Of special relevance in this context are Japan's roughly 300,000 neighborhood associations that are spread across the country (cf. Pekkanen/Tsujinaka 2008, 707)⁸. These groups have a long and vibrant history in Japan; Historians date them back to the village taxation units, which were in effect rather than a system of taxing individuals during the Tokugawa Period (1603–1868) (cf. Gordon 2003, 16).

Neighborhood associations are voluntary groups whose membership is drawn from a small, geographically delimited and exclusive residential area (a neighborhood) and whose activities are multiple and are centered on that same area (Pekkanen 2006, 87, bold in original).

⁸ Due to the ongoing initiatives by the Japanese government to merge municipalities, it is impossible to determine a figure clarifying the density of neighborhood associations in Japan.

Neighborhood associations are often divided into sub-district units, each of which consists of ten to 30 households; another division into functional groups – divided along the content of their activities (e.g. in the realm of welfare, commons, social and security) – also frequently occurs. An average 80 percent to 90 percent of local residents are members in a neighborhood association (cf. Pekkanen/Tsujinaka 2008, 709–712). Membership does not necessarily allow drawing conclusions on the participation rate in any organization, but as large-scale survey research shows “about half of the population in Japan” (Pekkanen/Tsujinaka 2008, 712) is active in neighborhood associations.

Neighborhood associations foster social capital in various ways: Firstly, they provide an outlet for citizens to enjoy social life with a particular focus on activities in the realm of what Ogawa (2009, 602) called the “cultural model” of social capital.

Secondly, it should be taken into account – as Putnam (cf. 2000, 326pp.) has shown for the US case – that “social networks help you stay healthy” (Putnam 2000, 331). Neighborhood associations contribute to the promotion of health of, in particular, senior citizens by e.g. organizing trips to local health facilities, where the elderly can familiarize “with the available health resources and how to access them” (Pekkanen/Tsujinaka 2008, 714). They also provide a forum for peers to “observe the health of the group members, giving an opportunity for early detection of health concerns” (ibid.). Furthermore they increase the “levels of generalized trust at the individual level” (ibid.). Members in neighborhood associations are more than twice as likely to trust their neighbors as non-members (ibid.).

Next to issues of social life and health care, thirdly, cooperation with other networks is of high relevance to fostering social capital. Due to its close cooperation with local level government agencies such as the Social Welfare Councils, neighborhood associations serve as an agent for information flow from local governments to citizens. In cooperation with each other, neighborhood associations and the Social Welfare Councils are also engaged in hands-on activities. They, e.g. “deliver meals to the lonely elderly, have regular lunch parties, (and) make regular care visits” (Pekkanen/Tsujinaka 2008, 715).

Among the grassroots level initiatives the Education Ministry in its report on “Lifelong Learning and Social Education” deems necessary when aiming to “create a lifelong learning society” (cf. MEXT 2010) is the following: “providing support for a range of regional and volunteer activities that help to deepen a sense of community among local residents, and promote the social participation of people, such as the elderly” (cf. MEXT 2010). In Japan, neighborhood associations are at the backbone of creating networks between local residents and enriching these networks with social trust. Senior citizens play a central role in shaping these networks carried by neighborhood associations (cf. Pekkanen/Tsujinaka 2008, 714).

The role that is inherent to lifelong learning as an element of fostering the social dimension of social capital through community-based and community-oriented activi-

ties, e.g. via the institution of neighborhood associations, shall be illustrated through a case from Nagano prefecture. Shionomichi, literally translated as salt road, is Japan's longest and oldest route used for transporting salt from village to village in Japan's mountainous region facing the Japan Sea coast. A group of local volunteers aiming to preserve the ancient track gathered in 1974, and initiated the first "Shionomichi hike". By now, the hike has become an established event, which is being promoted as "Road to Lifelong Learning" (*shōgai gakushū kaidō*) (cf. Shionomichi 2010). The Shionomichi group claims that hiking on this ancient path serves two goals, both of which have been identified above as elements contributing to fostering social capital within local communities. Firstly, engaging in the hike has positive effects on participants' health. Secondly, the hike provides an outlet for citizens to enjoy social life combined with knowledge gain. The "Shionomichi hike" along the road promises insights into history, myths, religion, folklore as well as regional trading goods and dietary culture (cf. Shionomichi 2010).

3.3 The economic dimension of social capital

While the social dimension – as can be judged from the wording alone – is at the core when studying the formation of social capital and the way it contributes to the creation of a lifelong learning society, the economic dimension must not be neglected in this context. In contrast to nineteenth-century social theory, which stresses the fear "that capitalism would undermine the preconditions of its own success by eroding impersonal ties and social trust" (Putnam 2000, 282), this paper argues that next to this element of danger, the economy in fact also has a positive effect on the creation of social trust and social networks. Linkages between economy and society may in fact foster social capital rather than to destroy it. Three aspects shall serve as foundation to this argument.

First, the Education Ministry in its report on "Lifelong Learning and Social Education" explicitly acknowledges the major role that "private sector education programs and associations" play in providing "education and culture centers" (MEXT 2010). In other words, the monetary contribution of the private sector in building and maintaining the facilities of a lifelong learning society are not to be underestimated.

Secondly, the economic dimension of social capital is most obvious within the "sphere intermediate between family and state in which social actors pursue neither profit within the market nor power within the state" (Schwartz 2003, 2). Neighborhood associations, elaborated upon in section 3.2, are part of this sphere as are nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations and other forms of formal or informal civic and advocacy groups, foundations, philanthropies and research institutions (cf. Schwartz 2003, 2). This sphere, of course, refers to civil society. As population aging proceeds and Japanese governments at the municipal, prefectural and national levels "have begun to realize their economic and administrative limitations in coping with demographic change," civil society is more and more called upon "to fill in policy

gaps” (Potter 2008, 687). At the same time, in particular after the 1998 enactment of the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities⁹, civil society in Japan “has grown in size and capability, and its visibility has prompted the public administration to take it more seriously as a potential policy actor” (Potter 2008, 687).

As civil society activities increased in number and variety, the sector needed to draw more human resources. Here the economic dimension of social capital becomes obvious in two ways: Firstly, companies now “choose several strategies from cooperation with NPOs to the employment of persons from civil society to get access to that knowledge” (Ducke/Moerke 2005, 38). The authors refer to implicit knowledge acquired, e.g. in community organizing. Secondly, the other way round, knowledge spillover from companies into civil society organizations can occur. This in particular refers to knowledge concerning latest technologies and finance management (cf. *ibid.*, 37).

The third aspect on the relevance of the economic dimension of social capital building takes issue with a form of employment of senior citizens typical to Japan, the silver¹⁰ human resource centers. Just like neighborhood associations, silver human resource centers are organized in a geographically delimited area, and can be found virtually everywhere in Japan. They serve as a work agency for senior citizens. They do not, however, put senior citizens in competition to job seekers from the working age population, but arrange part-time paid employment for them in certain niches. Their employment in many cases has a positive impact on community building: It might include serving as a janitor at a school, do gardening in a local park or household work in a family with young children. Positions could also focus on contributing to the personal lifelong experience of the senior citizens, such as doing handicraft or office work or engaging in teaching activities at a community center; many of these working areas are mentioned as activity areas, e.g. of the silver human resource center in Tokyo’s Shibuya ward (cf. SSJS 2010). Research has shown that in particular for senior men taking up work through a silver human resource centers leads to their increased well-being (cf. Weiss et al. 2005, 47).

All three aspects to the economic dimension of building social capital through lifelong learning (and working) activities hold inherent the three factors already defined for the social dimension: enjoying social life, promoting individual health, creating networks. While the health aspect in the economic dimension seems to be more indirect than it is in the social dimension, it is just the reverse for the networking aspect. Networking occurs much more direct and more frequently in the economic dimension of social capital building. We may conclude that both the social and economic dimensions of social capital building complement each other.

9 The so-called NPO Law enabled even small civic groups to incorporate, thus granting to them the status of a legal person. Up until then, i.e. without the status of a legal person, civic groups were not able to act as a partner in any form of business. Even renting office space for group activities, e.g., was impossible.

10 “Silver” refers to the color of the hair of the elderly, and is frequently being used as a euphemism referring to old age, i.e. in a demographic sense aged 65 years and above.

4. Conclusion

Japan – in the midst of an era of rapid demographic change – relies on social capital as a vital source for the further development of the nation. With political and administrative bodies stretched tight, in particular with regard to financial and personnel resources, social capital, i.e. social networks filled with common norms and social trust, needs to fill already existing and further spreading holes of the welfare state. Social capital is at the backbone of the well-being of the nation. Its social and economic dimensions make sure Japan's social systems, in particular with regard to elderly care, are functioning. They do so by promoting joy and health among Japan's citizens, as well as some general network building. Political actors increasingly confronting citizens with demands to enhance social capital building is a phenomenon that can be observed in many industrialized nations, including Germany (von der Leyen 2009). Nowhere, however, is this demand as urgent as in Japan, the fastest aging and shrinking one among the industrialized nations.

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