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Volunteerism and the State in Japan

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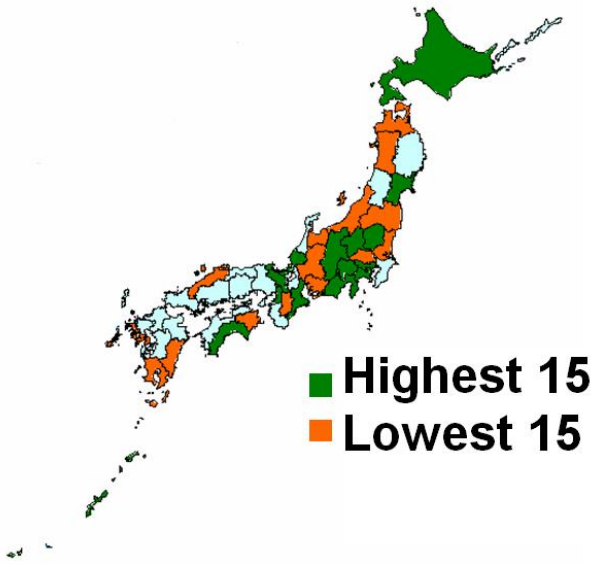
Borantia and NPOs in Japan

In 2006, close to 400,000 people in Japan participated in voluntary activities and more than 30,000 volunteer associations received a nationally certified status as non-profit organizations (NPOs). In 1985, only about 100,000 people counted as volunteers. These figures indicate not only a quantitative but also a qualitative change. Japan today is moving toward a *borantia shakai* or volunteer-oriented civil society, with particularly high rates of NPO activitity in urban regions. Why has this change occurred?



Density of NPOs in Japan by prefecture in 2002

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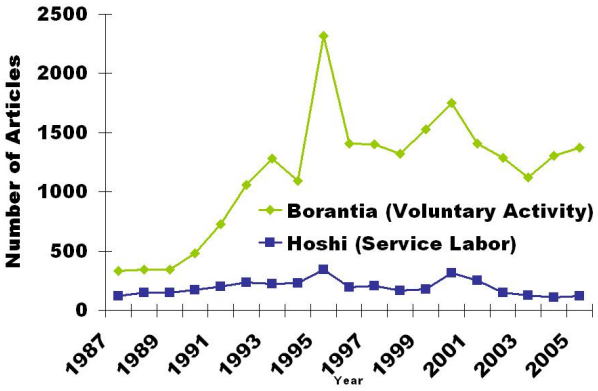
Source: Cabinet Office of Japan, 2002; The Japanese Census, 2000.
Notes: The authors compiled the number of certified NPOs per population in each prefecture from the Cabinet Office data at the end of October 2002 and also calculated the population figures from the 2000 Japanese national census.

Not *Hoshi* (Service Labor) But *Borantia* (Voluntary Activity)

Offering a fresh perspective, our study shows that this transformation occurred under the impetus of new "social expectations" that guided people into a wide range of volunteer activity. Surely, a much earlier tradition of social movements — without a certified status from the government — spoke, wrote and acted since the 1960s. However, many of those movement groups with citizens involved in peace, environmental and consumer movements subsequently became inactive with loss of money and smaller memberships. This is in part because these groups faced difficulties due to lack of government-certified legal status as legitimate organizations. But a new "social expectation" emerged in Japan during the early 1990s – that is, a social transformation toward an active *borantia shakai* or volunteer-oriented society with those organizations known as *enu-pi-o* or NPOs. The virtual replacement in everyday Japanese usage of the old term for service, "*hoshi*," by the new one, "*borantia*" (from the English term "volunteer") shown in the figure illustrates this transformation. *Borantia* has connotations of personal – not forced or initiated by the authorities - decision and citizen action.



Frequencies of voluntary activities (borantia) & service labor (hoshi) newspaper articles in Japan 1987–2005.
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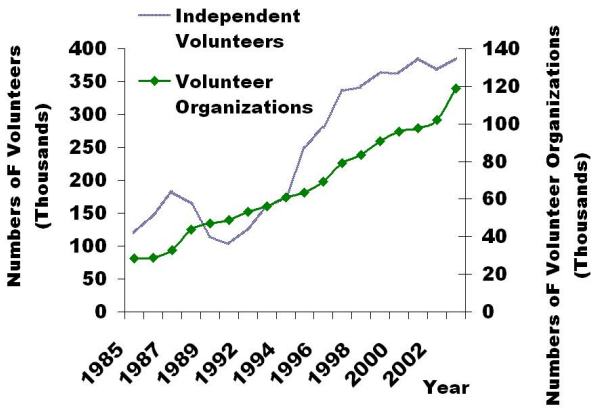
Source: Asahi Shimbun data archives 1987–2005.

"Social Expectation:" Cheer-Leading Effects for Growing Volunteerism & NPOs

The recent increase in numbers of volunteers and NPOs in Japan is neither simply a naturally emerging phenomenon of energetic volunteers popping up to help others in need, nor does it result from the Japanese government's manipulation of citizen orientations. Counts of newspaper articles with the term *borantia*, or voluntary activities, reveal a burst of increase with the Kobe earthquake in 1995 — a historically particular time when volunteers were needed, precisely given the patent failure of the authorities to provide succor for the injured and homeless in a timely way. Although we believe the Kobe earthquake helped spread the new concept of voluntary activism and NPOs widely throughout Japan, it is important to note that seeds of social expectation had already been planted. While the earthquake stimulated a burst of activity, overall, the pattern is one of gradual increase from the late 1980s and stability from the mid 1990s, rather than a dramatic decrease to the level of the earlier period. This suggests that the new concept and "social expectation" for *borantia shakai* is becoming deeply embedded in Japanese consciousness.



Number of volunteers and volunteer organizations in Japan 1985–2003.
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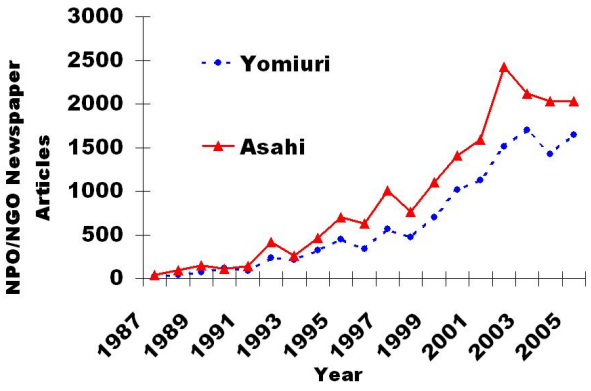
Source: JMA Research Institute inc. 2003

Planting the Seeds of Volunteerism

In the early 1990s, a group of NPO leaders planted the seeds of volunteerism in Japanese society. Their ideas affected first a group of elites during the early 1990s; they in turn created a general "social expectation" favoring a volunteer-oriented society. Resonating with this initiative, the media, younger politicians and leading citizens promoted this new type of civil society. This "social expectation" led to the 1998 passage of the NPO Law, legitimating and bolstering volunteerism and NPO activities in Japan today.



Frequencies of NPO/NGO newspaper

articles in Japan 1987–2005

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Source: Asahi Shimbun & Yomiuri Shimbun data archives 1987–2005.

From State Control to Civil Society

This development is fascinating. Scholars have long associated Japan with an image of a "strong controlling" nation-state. This is a perspective frequently referred to as a corporatist argument that focuses on the state. Many policy regulations and rigidly arranged social structures organize and oftentimes restrict free activities of individuals, groups and organizations in Japan. In the area of associational volunteer activities, for example, prior to the NPO Law such organizations were unable to establish their own bank accounts. Restrictions like this prevented volunteer groups from growing their activities to help the needy. It is not surprising that the older social movement groups from the 1960s and 1970s had difficulty in sustaining their activities as organizations and passing on their meaningful and great experiences to the next generation.

Promoting a New Civil Society: The NPO Law as a Trigger to Advance Japan

State control had long and deeply penetrated civil society. In contrast, the new vision of a freer volunteer and NPO society grew from certain key sources including internationally experienced leaders of non-governmental organizations like Yamaoka Yoshinori (a former program officer at the Toyota Foundation and currently a Hosei University professor), specialists in community planning, and some young progressive politicians. Their plan was to change government policies in ways that would trigger the emergence of a society with active associational volunteerism. It is clear that citizen leaders, not the interest of the older economically influential and political powers, initiated and propelled this social transformation, leading toward a further maturing civil society of Japan. The result is a more important role for NPOs and civil society, and a reduced primacy of state and corporation.

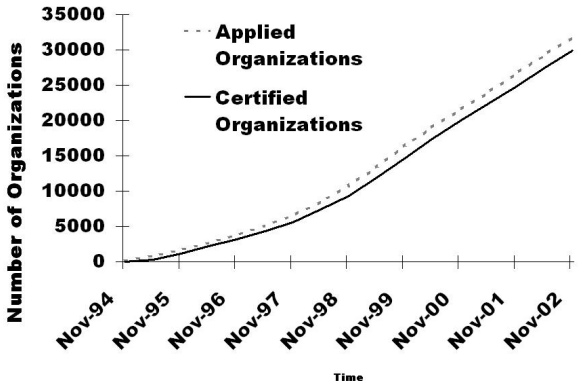
Policy Reports by NIRA

NPO leaders, aware of the structural barriers restricting associational volunteer activities in the early 1990s, were already working to promote a policy supportive of volunteer activities (the NPO Law). The National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) — which included many of the aforementioned leaders, in addition to other scholars and members of *Keidanren* (The Federation of Economic Organizations) — published its first policy research on NPOs *before* the 1995 Kobe Earthquake. While many assume that the earthquake triggered public support for volunteerism, our research documents the fact that citizen leaders were deeply engaged in the issue much earlier.

NPO Law Passage Accelerated

The historically significant 1993 loss of power by the Liberal Democratic Party and ensuing political instability, coupled with the natural disaster of the 1995 Kobe Earthquake, accelerated the passage of the NPO Law (1998). The NPO Law permits the legal certification and incorporation of certain volunteer organizations as non-profit organizations, specifically groups working for non-political, economic, or religious purposes in which no more than one third of staff receives compensation. This is one of the first, and perhaps the only, law for which non-governmental leaders and activists brought the bill into political discussion and eventual passage. In Japan, the NPO Law is considered to have passed into law very quickly. The first government attempt to formulate an NPO policy was a meeting of *Kokumin Seikatsu Shingi Kai* (the Citizens' Life Advisory Council) in July 1994. The NPO bill passed the Diet in

March 1998 and entered into force in December 1998.



Numbers of applied & certified organizations 1998–2006

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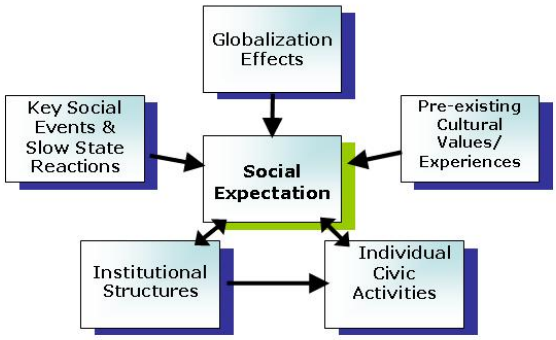
Source: Cabinet Office of Japan, 2007; Hasegawa, 2004

Producing *Nagare* — The Flow of Society

We define social expectation as a collective normative sense that resonates in the minds of people and organizations. In Japan, social expectation is *kuki* — an atmosphere that permeates society and gives rise not only to new laws but also to a range of social activities. When a new social expectation is introduced, it produces *nagare* — a flow of society toward the indicated new norm. The new social expectation for volunteerism conveys a vision of a Japanese future with reduced state and corporate control and a more dynamic and expansive civil society. Such an outcome could occur in two steps — first within the minds of leaders and then among citizens. Expanding waves of activism and NPOs show the social response in Japan.



Theoretical model of "social expectation" development in Japan

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Unlocking the Field of Associational Civil Activism

"Social expectation" has given rise to a more active volunteer-oriented society in Japan. Here, the NPO Law unlocked the field of associational civil activism. And this activism, independent of the state, appears to have expanded further, with the recent weakening of citizens' reliance and trust on state decisions, as observed in the growing concern that state policies do not reflect public opinion (59% in 1990 jumped to 75% in 2007, according to the Public Opinion Survey by the Cabinet Office of Japan). We suggest revisiting the explanation of Japan's civil society development with this "social expectation" perspective.

This article draws on and extends the analysis of "The Effects of 'Social Expectation' on the Development of Civil Society in Japan," Journal of Civil Society *3 (2), p. 179-203 (September 2007).*

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