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It's time for civil society, but ...

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In Japan, the NPO law was enacted 20 years ago in 1998, followed by the information disclosure law and the decentralization law which were enacted the next year. Spurred by these legal progresses, civil activities were energized and the number of certified NPOs increased from 23 in early days to 51,839 (of which 14,000 are environmental NPOs) in 2017. By now, the NPO activities are widely known in Japan. However, despite their improved presence, the environmental NPOs in Japan are still far away from being recognized as an active member of the civil society.

In 2009 when the Democratic Party of Japan (Minshu-to) took control of the government, they emphasized NPOs as “new public entities” and increased budget to support NPO activities. In June 2011, there was a tax reform for NPO and the NPO law itself was amended, which seemed to promise more donations and further development of NPO activities. However, after the Abe regime started in 2012, the government is seemingly lacking concerns with NPOs and civil society.

On the other hand, NPOs have gradually been invited to various councils of national and local governments. However, voices of NPOs are seldom listened to in the substantive discussion of policy making, and their participation seems to be just for a formality. Having seen a kind of belittling attitude toward NPOs for the past years, I am now skeptical if government officials consider NPOs as an important actor of the civil society. There was once an argument within a ministry in charge of NPO authorization/certification if it is OK to authorize/certify an NPO working for the elimination of nuclear power which is contrary to the policy of the government. That NPO strongly argued back that it is not OK for ministries to discriminate NPOs just because their activities are against the government policy. Finally they were certified, but this example indicates that the idea of “public interest” is distorted among the government officials. It is really wrong if they consider only those activities in line with the government policy can serve public interest. It is something quite different from the spirit of civil society per se.

Contrary to NPOs in Europe, NPOs in Japan are considered a kind of subcontractors of governments (national, local), if I may say so. Apparently, government officials do not wish to collaborate with NPOs. They may not be aware that NPOs can contribute to sound policy making/implementation. It seems that they just consider NPOs as a “nuisance” making things complicated in the course of policy making, and therefore they do not wish to fully support them financially.

For NPOs in Japan, financial issue is quite serious. The largest public subsidy that is open to environmental NPOs is the Japan Fund for Global Environment. However, the total of the fund is only 600 million yen per year, and it can be used only for NPOs’ on-site activities and not for their administrative expenses, which makes it hard for NPOs to run and maintain their organization. Donations in the form of NPO membership fees have gradually decreased in the past few years although one time donations from individual persons have slightly increased by 230 billion yen in total from 2009 to 775.6 billion yen in 2016. The lowering donation to environmental NPOs reflects the fact that people in this country are paying less attention to the global environmental issues when climate change is becoming more serious.

In the meantime, some NPOs has developed their expertise and can discuss on an equal footing by now with government officials in the policy making process. At the time of serious deterioration in the quality of Japanese leaders (in-group nepotism-like behavior of politicians rather than working for the future of Japan, or concealment/falsification/forgery of official documents by high level government officials), we should outgrow the idea of depending on these “public servants” and think seriously the future of our country on our own. For this end, NPOs can play a critical role providing necessary information as well as serve as a tool to express the “will” of the people.

Of course, NPOs cannot represent all people’s will, but NPOs, which are groups of good-will citizens wishing for the establishment of sustainable and happy society for all, will be able to do something better for us. Recognizing such character of NPOs, it is time that people earnestly support NPOs in order to develop a sustainable and people-based society.