

Kaze, April 2021

**Environmental NPOs serve the public interest, but in Japan ...
(What a survey result tells us.)**

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The Agenda 21 adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992 stipulates the need to enhance the roles of NPOs. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 clearly states the importance of civil society organizations. In the international community, NPOs/NGOs are considered an integral part of society and they are highly expected for their expertise. In Japan in 2000 or around, policymakers seemed to recognize the importance of environmental protection, and we successfully led the enactment of the law to promote environmental education. However, the survey we conducted last fall in collaboration with the National Institute of Environmental Studies (NIES) revealed that things have not improved in the past two decades.

Let me outline the result of the survey which was conducted online with 442 responses received.

1) Size of organizations

Most organizations are small with less than 100 members (67%) and the number of staff members is less than five (47%). Budget size ranges from less than 30 thousand to 100 million yen, and 19% has a yearly budget of 3 – 10 million yen. After 20 more years of the enactment of the NPO law, 26% of respondents have not been incorporated. Most of them are voluntary local organizations practicing environmental education/awareness-raising activities or revitalization of the respective area with little profit earned. Few organizations engage in research activities and make policy recommendations based on their expertise. The survey also shows that those NPO leaders are aging. More than 90% of their representative are over 50 years of age.

2) Issues to be solved

Most NPOs have a difficulty in staffing, finding successors, and securing budgets. They all recognize the urgent need of strengthening their financial base, which enables them to employ capable staff for the long term.

For future activities, 47% consider stable funding is essential and 28% of the groups have some difficulties finding next-generation leaders. As regards the future direction of the society, 59% think it necessary that people become aware of the environmental issues as a part of their life, and 56% feel that institutional support (taxation system, subsidies, etc.) is required for their active participation in NPOs.

3) Needs for NPOs/NGOs to work together

Only 17% know the Green Alliance Japan, but 77% think that NPOs/NGOs need to work together.

4) Participation in environmental policymaking

55% have experienced policy-making procedures of mostly local communities (prefectures, cities, towns). Of them, 80% think that the experience enhanced their skills and helped expand their network. Of all respondents, 74% feel the need to renew the current environmental policies or to start new policies/projects, which indicates that they are not satisfied with the current status of environmental policies.

5) Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Major problems raised are: they cannot hold on-site events/meetings, cannot visit their activity areas and resulting income decrease. Instead, they started such new activities as online meetings and seminars. However, less than 10% enjoyed the positive effect (enhanced dissemination, more audience/supporters, increased income) of the pandemic. More than 80% consider that through the pandemic experience, local, social and economic systems should be reviewed to make necessary modifications.

It seems that the corona pandemic provides us with a good opportunity to think deeply about the current ways of living, and about a better economic and social system for the future. At the same time, the survey result represents the

problems that I observe in our day-to-day activities. To my great disappointment, the problems they raised are almost the same as those we identified in the early 2000s. Behind this is the fact that, in Japan, NPOs/NGOs are not recognized their serving the public interest.

Contrary to the situations in western countries where democracy is historically deep-rooted, Japanese people in general including national and local governments, regard environmental NPOs/NGOs as groups of volunteers to promote environmental conservation without profits. They have not and are not at all considered as partners to improve environmental policy-making. These days, some groups/leaders including myself are invited to the governmental panels and provide “opinion”, but it is quite different from partnering with the government. Following the statement of Prime Minister Suga to realize decarbonized society by 2050, the government injects a huge amount of public money into the business entities but does not provide NPOs/NGOs with any support for their public interest activities.

It is regrettable that, in Japan, governments, the general public, and even NPOs/NGOs themselves do not recognize environmental NPOs/NGOs as expert groups that serve the public interest (environment). Of course, on-site activities are quite important for environmental conservation/protection, but such activities alone will not improve the current NPO/NGO situation of poor funding/staffing. To fully play the expected roles as non-profit and non-governmental organizations, further action is needed to reflect their firsthand experiences to the actual policy-making.

Today, urgent issues are piled up: climate crisis, ecosystem collapse, issues related to plastics disposal, chemical issue, and energy issues including atomic-power generation, etc. Governments and governmental organizations alone are limited in their ability to cope with all these issues. It is time they recognize the role of NPOs/NGOs and invite them to the policy-making process. For that purpose, the status of NPOs/NGOs is to be articulated, and based on that understanding, their activities for public benefits should be subsidized and promoted. Utilizing this survey result, we will work on the government to recognize NPOs/NGOs are representing environmental benefits.