

## Chapter 7. The Voluntary Sector in Rural Communities

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### Social Capital and the Voluntary Sector

The problems facing rural volunteer associations in both countries are cause for concern given the connection between a healthy associational life and enriched levels of social capital and its essential function in rural revitalization. This chapter addresses certain aspects of the problem in the context of the research sites in these two very different nations, Japan and Canada.

On a global scale, voluntary organizations are an increasingly important feature of the response to the pressures of modern life upon civil society. According to Salaman et al. (2003), they constitute a major economic force harnessing trillions of dollars and engaging millions of people in both paid and un-paid work. Individuals who volunteer are depicted as freely associating in pursuit of common interests and goals. Participation in the voluntary sector builds levels of trust and attachment while enhancing the development of common values and understanding. These outcomes of volunteer activity are the essence of social capital.

In Japan the economic effects from liberalized trade have challenged traditional patterns of community life and future opportunity. Participation rates for volunteer activities have fluctuated accordingly (Statistics Bureau, 2004). Generally speaking, the upsurge in the need for voluntary sector services in Japan is rising at the same time as the resources necessary for sustaining and building such services, namely financial and human resources, are diminishing.

In rural Canada, the situation is similar. Bruce and Halseth (1999) document an increasing dependency on volunteer-based activities to fill the gaps from reduced government service provisions in rural Canada. Research in Ontario, Canada, notes that voluntary organizations are in a state of crisis, dealing with "pervasively high levels of change, stress, uncertainty, and discouragement" (Reed & Howe, 2000, p. 4). The National Survey of Giving Volunteering and Participating (NSGVP) confirms this assessment and indicates that the number of people volunteering has decreased significantly from 1997-2000 (McClintock, 2000). Representatives of one in four voluntary organizations, surveyed by Reed and Howe, fear for the very survival of their group. This fear of extinction translates into heightened competition for volunteers and financial donations (Barr et al., 2004). The costs to communities include "under-service, a reduction in community integration, and a growing sense of isolation among those few agencies that remain in smaller communities" (Reed & Howe, 2000, p. 3).

Awano is a typical example of a rural Japanese town (*machi*) with access to off-farm employment (see Appendix 2 for a description of Awano). Awano is located in a semi-mountainous area in Tochigi prefecture, about 100 km from Tokyo and 26 km from Utsunomiya city, the capital of Tochigi Prefecture. Local residents are employed in resource-dependent industries such as agriculture and forestry, services for agri-tourism, and other "off-farm" commuter jobs outside of Awano.

Tweed, one of 32 research sites for the NRE Program, was selected as a typical rural Ontario village, acting as a service centre for the surrounding farm and rural non-farm community. It is approximately 200 kilometers from capital cities and 40 kilometers from a major urban center. Like agriculture, the manufacturing industry and public service sectors have declined in the economy of Tweed that is currently based on tourism and retirement functions as well as retail and agricultural services. In recent years, like Awano, Tweed has undergone municipal government amalgamation.

Data used in this chapter was originally gathered for the New Rural Economy Project (NRE) (Reimer, 2002). Several sources are used, including household surveys (HHS) conducted in 2001 for Canada and 2002 for Japan, interviews with key informants in the research sites, and basic information gathered as part of site profiles. Appendix 1 of this book describes the methodologies.

### **Voluntary Organizations in Rural Canada and Japan**

Although voluntary associations are important institutions within both Japanese and Canadian rural communities, these associations have some basic differences. In Ontario, as in North America generally, voluntary organizations exist as institutions that give expression to individuals' common interests and values while being relatively independent from state control. Typical of these organizations are: service clubs, for example, the Optimist Club, Women's Institutes, and 4-H clubs; sports and recreation organizations; for instance, minor baseball and hockey leagues; and cultural associations, including arts councils, community theatre, and heritage groups.

Voluntary organizations in rural Japan, however, operate within a more constrained milieu that reflects traditional feudal culture and patrimonial relations. Voluntary organizations deemed to reflect special interests such as those related to Japanese arts, culture, and recreation receive little to no funding from external entities. Other voluntary organizations deemed to be for public benefit receive support from municipal governments or semi-governmental organizations and are guided by significant input from local government employees. Individuals who work for the municipality and live in the community are considered desirable leaders for public benefit associations because these people have organizing skills and are knowledgeable about how the "system" works (van Wolferen, 1989). Many community groups operate in conjunction with the preparation for specific holidays and religious festivals. More recently, new kinds of voluntary groups directly related to community business enterprises have emerged with strong support from government agencies to promote economic development.

Despite these differences, rural community residents in both countries point to a number of similar pressures on volunteer organizations. First among these is an aging population and the associated difficulties in attracting new members and retaining existing membership. At the same time the aging of the population also increases demands for voluntary services. A third concern is that interest in community service appears to be waning in favor of more individual-centred activity.

Mounting external pressures are also adding substantially to the dynamic. The Canadian trend is for greater levels of accountability from funding agencies, more direct competition with other voluntary organizations, and a shift to funding through contracts for

services rather than general support grants (Reed & Howe, 2000). Government support is increasingly conditional upon requirements for multiple partners, more business-like organization and accountability, and shorter, project-focused funding as opposed to general operating support. Non-government financial support for voluntary organizations is also shifting to new corporate governance models.

## Voluntary Organizations and Participation Rates in Awano and Tweed

Rural voluntary associations may be placed into eight categories (CRRF, 1999): social service, health service, local economic development, arts and culture, recreation, youth and seniors, service clubs, and religion. Within these classifications several different types of voluntary organizations may be functioning, including those that have no formal structure such as ad hoc self-help groups.

Recreational and service clubs are the dominant rural community organizations in Tweed, confirmed by the healthy ratios of number of organizations to residents (6.4 per 1000 people and 5.1 per 1000 people respectively) (see Table 1). Many of the voluntary associations on the Tweed list are currently faced with several challenges. Among the most difficult is the need for increased membership, especially from newer, younger members who are not already heavily committed to other interests. Problems with inadequate funding and a lack of full community support were also raised during interviews.

Table 1. Number and type of voluntary organizations in Tweed and Awano, 2000-2003

Type	Tweed		Awano	
	Number	Per 1000 population	Number	Per 1000 population
Health service	2	1.3	1	0.1
Social service	4	2.5	4	0.4
Local economic development	1	0.6	12	1.1
Arts and Culture	5	3.2	79	7.2
Recreation	10	6.4	49	4.5
Youth and seniors	2	1.3	29	2.6
Service clubs	8	5.1	11	1.0
Religious	6	3.8	5	0.5
Community Council*	n/a	n/a	7	0.1
Total	38		186	
Average		3.0		2.0

\* Community Councils in Awano are not comparable to anything in Tweed. See below.  
Source. Field Research, 2000-2003

In Japan, voluntary associations are located at different jurisdictional levels, including *machi* (town), “*Komunitai Kyogikai* or community council” (district), and *shuraku* (hamlet). The numbers and types of voluntary organizations in Awano are noted in Table 1 along with the ratio of numbers of organizations to the population. The community council is the basic program unit introduced by the government in the 1970s in response to changing

demographics and weakening of communal ties within local societies. A community council is a group of *shuraku* that come together to organize voluntary associations and to plan cultural events. The councils do not provide programs that address economic revitalization issues.

As noted earlier, voluntary organizations deemed to be for public benefit are often created in rural Japan through the direct intervention of the municipal government at the initial formative stage. A representative of each *shuraku* within a community council is expected to play a leadership role in running the public benefit social services and economic development organizations (for example, women's driver clubs, river environment conservation groups, and rural development groups). In contrast, most volunteer organizations related to arts, culture, and recreation are organized more informally with less to no input from the local government. Rather they pay an annual fee to be enrolled in the Awano Cultural Association, a semi-governmental, public benefit organization for life-long education, in order to access various opportunities to exhibit their works during Awano festivals. Voluntary organizations in Awano face challenges similar to those in Tweed, such as declining and aging membership, less commitment among younger people who usually commute outside of Awano town, low turnover of core active members, and so on.

The number and type of voluntary organizations in each site provide a basic description of what residents have access to in their communities. The more voluntary organizations are available, the more opportunity residents have to work together and develop relations of trust, reciprocity and common interests. According to Table 1, the number and predominance of certain types of voluntary organizations are substantially different for Awano and Tweed. There are twice as many recreation groups in Tweed as there are arts and culture organizations whereas the situation is almost reversed in Awano with arts and culture organizations outnumbering recreation 8 to 5. Similarly youth and senior groups in Awano make up approximately 16 per cent of all voluntary associations while in Tweed they constitute barely five per cent. The range of voluntary organizations also differs widely between the two places. In Tweed, the maximum number is 10 for recreation while the minimum number of 1 is for local economic development. In Awano, the maximum number is 79 for arts and culture and the minimum number is 1 for health service.

Differences between Awano and Tweed persist in terms of residents' participation in their local voluntary organizations is described in Table 2.

Table 2. Tweed and Awano residents' membership in voluntary organizations, 2001, 2002

Tweed (N=96)	82%
Awano (N=181)	34%

Source. HHS in Tweed 2001; HHS in Awano, 2002

Evidence for Tweed indicates that approximately 80 per cent of those surveyed are members of some kind of voluntary organization. This rate is substantially higher than Awano's 34 per cent and the Ontario rural average for membership reported at 31% (Barr et al., 2003). Tweed's assessment may be positively skewed because the Canadian NRE Household Survey (unlike many recent national surveys) defined voluntary organizations very broadly ranging from labour unions and professional associations through to highly informal associations (e.g. coffee and bridge clubs). Membership also covers a wide spectrum of commitment to a voluntary group, from being heavily involved, defined as taking an

executive position and committing significant time to the organization, to having nominal membership, defined as belonging to an organization but rarely going to meetings or doing anything for the group.

In Awano, the apparent lower level of involvement in voluntary organizations compared with Tweed should not be interpreted as meaning that Japanese rural residents have fewer chances to socialize among themselves – quite the opposite. In rural Japan, there are some organizations to which every household should be, or is expected to be a member. The community council is one of these. The Awano Community Council provides residents with access to recreational and cultural experiences and services.

The community council may be interpreted as a bridge between social capital and governance in Awano. The involvement of citizens in mutual interest voluntary organizations in Awano provides access to events organized by the community council, thereby generating a public benefit while fulfilling the mutual interest mission of the volunteer associations. It is interesting to note that most respondents did not identify themselves as members of a community council, despite having access to its events and services.

This Japanese context for the delivery of cultural and recreation events and services on behalf of member volunteer associations to the general public may be interpreted as a way to lever social capital. However, the direct comparisons for Tweed and Awano suggest that the participation rate in voluntary organizations may not capture fully the effectiveness of the use of social capital, because of the interaction of voluntary activity with government and para-government organizations such as community councils, minor hockey associations, arts councils, heritage boards, federations of community leagues and municipal recreation departments.

The smaller number of public benefit organizations in Awano compared to Tweed, especially in the area of health and social services may reflect the extent of downloading of public services in Ontario. These public services are expected to be the function of government in rural Japan. Volunteer associations, also called NGOs (non-government organizations) do operate in niches abandoned by governments or deemed by special interest groups to be of importance. The latter are more often organized as mutual interest groups. In Japan they would likely join a community council. The former are more likely to be viewed as public interest groups, especially by governments seeking to download costly social services to unpaid volunteers. These groups would also likely be embedded in community councils with civil service support. In Canada both types of group would be autonomous with member identity.

It appears, therefore, that Tweed has more available social capital than Awano because Tweed residents not only have more voluntary organizations per person in their site, but also are more likely to belong to those associations and contribute to their functioning in some capacity. However, to the wider benefit of the community at large, Awano has created a community council to enhance the use of the social capital indicated to be available through the number of mutual interest volunteer associations.

Such contrasts may correspond to underlying differences in Canadian and Japanese culture. For instance, North American values include a wide diversity of interests and freedom of expression. This may result in more voluntary organizations per capita and higher membership rates than are found in Japan where voluntary associations exist in keeping with

values honoring tradition and accepting state authority even when it seems to constrain individual expression. Likewise, the tendency shown in Tweed for a more even distribution of numbers of voluntary organizations in each category (1-10) as opposed to Awano's (1-79) might reflect North American's well-established egalitarian value system as opposed to a more hierarchical stratification found in traditional Japanese society.

Nevertheless, both the communities of Tweed and Awano have available social capital as indicated by volunteer organizations. Each community has chosen a different way to mobilize and use this social capital. The choice reflects the co-evolution of government with the way citizens organize themselves to fulfill their needs and reinforce their core values.

## **How the Voluntary Sector Responds to Pressures for Change**

Despite differences noted for Awano and Tweed regarding their voluntary associations, these associations are increasingly facing similar pressures for revitalization driven in good part by global change. More than ever, citizens in both countries are connected to others around the world in terms of political action, economic relations, and cultural exposure. In some rural areas, outside or global ties have become more important than local ties. Rural communities are no longer stable isolated settlements with little change in expectations and routines for their residents' livelihoods. Life has become more fast-paced and mobile. People and industry move in and out according to exchange rates, interests and work/business opportunities, altering established family patterns and networks. At the household level, "rampant individualism" (Freie, 1998) results in a re-allocation of time and effort to promoting private over collective interests.

These and other universal features of modern life present serious challenges for the long-term survival of voluntary associations at the local level, perhaps even more so for rural than urban communities (Barr et al., 2004). Rural Ontario residents interviewed for NRE studies describe conditions that are also familiar to rural Japanese residents. For instance, they note:

"People have their own agenda and territory."

"[in our village] too many parts of the circle are broken."

"Only certain people do the work. So many of the population can't or don't."

"[When it comes time to do the work it is] always a few people. Never work as a whole." (Connell & Wall, 2001)

However, despite the mounting challenges for voluntary associations captured in these "typical" responses, the sector continues to exist and is now starting to receive serious attention internationally and domestically. A case in point is work at Johns Hopkins University where the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project has been hosted since 1990. This initiative is developing a systematic body of knowledge about the voluntary sector and now reports on conditions in more than 40 countries through all world regions. In Canada, several initiatives are on-going through the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy and the Federal Government's Voluntary Sector Affairs. In all cases the goals are similar, namely to increase our understanding of a sector that plays such an important role in community life yet remains largely unstudied and poorly equipped to handle current and future pressures for change.

For Awano and Tweed, the latter point leads to the following question: What choices are there for voluntary organizations (and those interested in them) to revitalize and sustain

the sector? Reed and Howe (2000) address a similar question in their assessment of voluntary organizations. They suggest there are 2 distinct paths to follow. One is oriented to actions that reflect a “business” approach, while the other favours an “idealism” perspective. A business response refers to actions focused on financial issues and broader conditions of economic development while an idealistic response covers those actions that emphasize personal and community values. In reality, these types of response are at opposite ends of a continuum with examples rarely confined to either extreme. Revitalization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires balancing the need for effective administration and business management with the satisfaction of members’ altruistic desires for improving the common good.

Based on Reed and Howe’s designation, Tables 3 and 4 provide some examples of how some voluntary organizations in Awano and Tweed have responded to the need for revitalization. When categorizing a response as either "idealism" or "business", a determination was made based on what was understood to be the primary strategy driving the change, not on the purpose of the organization or on the outcome.

Table 3. Responses to Change from Voluntary Organizations in Tweed, 2000

Business Based	Idealism Based
<p>In earlier years, the Business Improvement Association and Chamber of Commerce had failed because of lack of co-operation. In 2001 a commission was formed without formal structure but with more diverse membership. A new Chamber of Commerce formed in 2003 and, in 2004, they created and launched a new tourism marketing program in collaboration with neighbouring business associations.</p>	<p>Heritage group expanded its programs and its physical location by placing a high priority on local cultural assets and volunteerism. They employed a direct strategy to decrease dependence upon external resources and rely largely on the involvement of lay people and community-based action.</p>
<p>Library set up a fundraising group to address a chronic funding problem and to promote library activities.</p>	<p>Horticultural Society’s membership is growing rapidly due to increased interest in gardening as a hobby.</p>
<p>Curling Club is privately owned by membership and is in the process of negotiating a lower tax rate with the municipality.</p>	<p>Historical society membership recognizing it is getting old had plans to start a junior historical society to involve more members.</p>
<p>Community Care (for health services) formally re-organized and rationalized its programs in response to budget cuts. They now have more partnerships with external agencies and are involved with joint fundraising with other groups.</p>	<p>Farms not Factories, a voluntary group, was formed to oppose a proposal to build an intensive livestock operation in the area.</p>
<p>Trails club has increased its formal organization by moving from volunteer to paid staff. This was possible after receiving government funding to upgrade and maintain trails.</p>	
<p>Art Studio Tour was started within past five years to market local artists’ work to centres beyond the community.</p>	

Source. Field Research, 2000-2003

The examples from Tweed in Table 3 indicate more emphasis on adopting a business based approach for addressing challenges from current pressures for change instead of choosing tactics that rely on individuals' commitment to community and personal values. The same trend appears to exist for Awano (see Table 4) suggesting that attempts to maintain and revitalize the voluntary sector in rural areas are similar in both countries.

Table 4. Responses to Change from Voluntary Organizations in Awano, 2002

Business Based	Idealism Based
<p>A restaurant association and other commercial associations rely on the Awano Board of Commerce to carry out their administrative work. The associations can then focus their energy on promotion and service delivery.</p>	<p>To deal with the growing needs of rural elderly, the Social Welfare Council asked each neighborhood organization to appoint several women from every <i>shuraku</i> to cooperate with the Visiting Group. These women get together regularly to cook meals and deliver them to needy residents. They also provide a social visit and help them in case of emergency.</p>
<p>A neighbourhood organization approached the local government to take over roadside maintenance (e.g, grass cutting) instead of letting the government contract the job out to a business. Volunteers did the work and dedicated the money received toward community activities sponsored by the neighbourhood organization.</p>	
<p>Soccer association improved their youth membership by having the local government build new and improved facilities in the local athletic park.</p>	
<p>Timber association faced serious challenges because of declining markets but was able to use their more business-oriented timber cooperative to finalize a contract with the municipal government for a construction project.</p>	

Source. Field Research, 2002

A closer examination of each site's responses reveals some contrasts that once again hearken back to initial cultural differences. In Tweed "business" responses emphasize the strength and diversity of formal relations. For example, management strategies employed by their voluntary sector include altering several aspects of their organizations, such as changing operating principles and organizational mode to more formal and rationalized systems, along with developing more partnerships with external agencies. In Awano, the internal structure of the organization does not appear to be changing in the same way as in Tweed. One reason for this is the fact that, in Japan, there are few external funding agencies to make demands on voluntary groups for more efficiency in the business and administrative operations. The main funding source for voluntary organizations in rural Japan is the local government.

Local government leaders in Japan institute changes in voluntary groups by filling key



positions with people who will operate the organization more effectively and by directing funding to specific initiatives for the voluntary sector to carry out. Rural residents comply with new responsibilities that may be assigned to them even though they are not always positive about the situation. In other words, voluntary organizations, created by the initiative of the Japanese local government, seem to be one of the strategies to mobilize people to revitalize rural society.

Rural residents in Japan expect community leaders who are tied closely to local government exercise substantial control and provide guidance. Those officials put pressure on rural residents to fulfill obligations for participation in a number of societies and associations. Enlisting women in Awano to work for the "visiting group" (for elderly residents) is a case in point. A comparative example from Tweed comes with the actions "community care" put in place for dealing with a loss of income. Instead of pressuring residents to contribute more volunteer hours, solutions involved going outside the community for more resources from "external partners" and consolidating fund-raising activity with other not-for-profit organizations.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This brief examination of the voluntary sector in a Japanese and Canadian rural community confirms the importance voluntary organizations have for residents in both countries. Based on data from the NRE research sites, Tweed and Awano, some differences are evident between the two in terms of the number, type, and range of voluntary associations as well as participation rates. In all cases, Tweed has higher scores than Awano, a fact that is likely due to basic differences in cultural values. Canadians tend to operate with an ethic reflecting "freedom of choice" to pursue diverse interests while Japanese citizens, especially in rural areas are bound more by traditional authority and expectations. Generally speaking therefore, in Canada, participation in voluntary associations is an expression of individual tastes and pursuits while in Japan, participation is a reflection of commitment to heritage and communal values and deferral to authority.

For the purposes of this chapter, interest in the voluntary sector's role in rural revitalization is twofold. First, voluntary associations and groups are an integral part of rural community life and must therefore deal with their own challenges for revitalization as both local and global factors exert pressure for change. The chapter provides some insight into the tactics used and how they differ between Awano and Tweed. A second reason for considering conditions and future prospects in the voluntary sector is to improve our understanding of how it contributes to the larger rural community's revitalization. In this case, different aspects of voluntary associations are considered indicators for social capital, with the assumption that when the voluntary sector is doing well, the availability of social capital is greater and thereby able to make a larger contribution to community resources and capacity.

The manner in which the voluntary sector responds to new and persistent demands will have some impact on the quality and quantity of social capital that emerges in a community. When voluntary organizations adopt a more business-like approach for solving problems, they gain several benefits including meeting the demands of some funding agencies and ensuring scarce financial and human resources are not wasted. However, if they neglect the idealistic aspect at the root of their organizations, the sector runs the risk of eroding the trust, reciprocity, and common values that are the essence of social capital.

The future of revitalization for the voluntary sector and to some extent, rural communities, may depend on how well the trade off between business needs and idealistic attributes is managed. In Japan, the responsibility will lie largely with government officials who may have to step back from their authoritarian role and learn how to incorporate new social networks and attachments that are emerging outside traditional values and functions of community councils. For Canada, the government may have to become more involved and alleviate some of the funding and administrative pressures facing voluntary organizations so members can re-affirm their attachments to each other and to the intrinsic values their organizations embody.

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