Social Isolation and Local Government: The Japanese Experience

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Japan Local Government Centre

- Council of Local Authorities for International Relations
- Membership organisation of local authorities supported by Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
- Seven international offices: London, Paris, Sydney, New York, Singapore, Seoul, Beijing
- London covers UK, Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark
- Roles:
  1) Research into local government systems and policies
  2) Assisting overseas activities of Japanese local governments
  3) Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET)
Social Isolation in Japan

**Definition:**
Those whose social needs are not met
Those who have no-one to turn to in times of need
Those who do not have meaningful social interactions on a regular basis

- Elderly
- Hikikomori (230,000 Cabinet Office survey, 2010)
- People with disabilities or mental health issues
- Single mothers
- Out of work/low income

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Japan’s Aging Population

White Paper on Elderly Care, Cabinet Office of Japan (2013)
**Kodokushi: Lonely Deaths**

Deaths at home (Over 65)

Deaths undiscovered for over 1 week


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**Kodokushi: An increasing problem**

- Post-war changes in changes in family structure
- Change in housing
- Economic conditions
- De-population in rural areas
- Changing attitudes to marriage

*Not just a problem of ‘lonely death’ but one of isolation in daily life*
Social Isolation in the Elderly

How frequently do you have a conversation with someone (including telephone and email)?

Data from White Paper on Elderly Care, Cabinet Office of Japan (2013)

Social Isolation in the Elderly

Community Links:

Data from White Paper on Elderly Care, Cabinet Office of Japan (2013)
Social Isolation in the Elderly

I have no-one I can ask for help if I am in trouble:

Nationwide: 4.7m households with a single resident over 65 (MHLW)

Data from White Paper on Elderly Care, Cabinet Office of Japan (2013)

Policy Responses

National
- Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and Ministry of Finance provide support for implementation of successful schemes at local level
- Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications coordinates and evaluates local initiatives
- Collation of Information – Change in personal data regulations

Local
- Promotion of worry free living environments for older residents
- 24 hour/on demand support services
- Local inclusive care centres
- IT support and infrastructure
- Partnership with local business, voluntary sector (home visits etc.)
- Community based activities
Adachi: No More Lonely Deaths

- Missing Centenarians?
- Power of Communities Division – Zero Isolation Project
- Identification of single person households, over 70, not currently subscribed to public health insurance
- Visits by neighbourhood associations – Do they have enough social interaction? Do they have someone to turn to in times of need?
- Information shared with relevant services (police, welfare organisations etc.)
- Support and encouragement to engage with community activities

Public Libraries in Japan: Tackling Social Isolation and Building Communities
Libraries in Japan: Facts

- First public library in Japan opens 1872
- Library Law (1950): Public Libraries must be tax supported, free to use and adequate to meet the information needs of the local community
- 3,234 public libraries (2012)
- Local government responsibility
- 100% prefectures, 98.5% cities, 54% municipalities
- 303.5m visits (2012)
- Focus on books - number of holdings, borrowing rates
- Citizens’ Public Halls

Changing Role of Libraries in Japan

- Post-Tsunami – Importance of libraries as providers of local information, safe spaces for gathering, community activities, relaxation
- Libraries to foster communities – community consultation and involvement
- Funahashi (Toyama) – pop 3000, 72% registered library users
- Imari (Saga) – Run with cooperation of 27 community groups
Hagi City 萩

700km²
Population 53,600

Hagi City Ai-brary

Aim: ‘To facilitate the use of historic materials and increase convenience, but furthermore to create a meeting place, somewhere where community development can take place.’

Ai-brary Principles:
• A library that all citizens can easily access
• A library that fosters children’s creativity
• A library that builds communities and citizens
• A library that improves citizen’s lives
Hagi City Ai-ibrary

Achievements
• Visitor numbers increased 10x
• Books borrowed increased 1.5x
• Registered Hagi City residents 40%
• 81 days extra opening, 3 hours longer

• 365 days opening 9.00-21.00
• Digital services – access to national catalogue
• ICT – automated check out etc.
• 23 staff (13 qualified librarians)
• 22, 156 members
• 369, 645 books borrowed (2012)
• New services – Café, magazine sponsorship scheme, wi-fi, outside space

NGO and Community Partnership

• Partnership with the NGO ‘Everyone’s Library Hagi’, established by citizens of Hagi City
• Citizens involved in library management, new initiatives, growth and problem solving
• Making Communities is Making Citizens: Making Citizens begins with the Library
Hagi Children’s Centre

Aims:
• Provide a place for children to be
• To fulfil Hagi City’s overall childcare policies
• Foster links between parents and carers

Children’s library
Event hall
Music studio
Exercise studio
Crèche and children’s clubs
Play park

54,712 visits (2012)
NGO: Hagi Children’s Centre

Conclusions

• Social isolation is an increasing problem in Japan, and one which local authorities are taking seriously
• Social isolation strategies currently focus on the elderly, but can be expanded to other vulnerable groups
• Libraries are an important resource, not only for provision of information, but for creation of community links
• Many public libraries are recognising the advantages of engaging in community activities
• Libraries can be at the centre of town revitalisation strategies