

Citizen Participation in Governmental Decision Making in Japan: A Review

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Abstract

Over the past decade citizens have become much more involved in several aspects of policy-making and governance. Public participation in decision-making is seen to generate more accountability, better performance, strengthening of democracy, and counters the influence of powerful dominant groups. The trend is increasing worldwide, and in Japan as well. In this paper we review the nature of public participation in Japan, with the aim to understand the dynamics and nuances of participation in a country with a distinct cultural heritage. A total of 36 papers specific to public participation in Japan (versus volunteerism) are reviewed, from five English publication databases. We acknowledge several meaningful and relevant articles published only in Japanese may have got missed in the review. The paper, therefore, may not be a comprehensive representation of the dynamics of participation in Japan. Nevertheless, the paper does provide cross sectional data of various types of situations faced by the Japanese citizens and the administration, and is one of the first reviews to explore the nature and dynamics of public participation in Japan.

1.0 Introduction

Over the past decade citizens have become much more involved in several aspects of policy-making and governance. Decentralization of governance has legally institutionalized citizen participation in various sectors including transportation, electricity, health and water supply. Direct multi stakeholder decision-making is seen to generate more accountability, better performance, strengthening of democracy, and counters the influence of powerful dominant groups (Crook and Manor, 1998; Avritzer, 2002; Drèze and Sen, 2002; Rakodi, 2003). Hence, public involvement in governance is seen as part of a socio-political modernization process (Van Tatenhove, 1999).

Public participation in governance is an increasing trend worldwide, and in Japan as well. Enshrined in the Japanese constitution (under laws like Local Autonomy Law, 1946; Public Comment Procedure, 1999 etc.) the 47 prefectures and 1719 municipalities enjoy considerable autonomy in the field of administration. They are expected to develop policies concerning area management based on discussions with local citizens rather than depending on the central government (Mahmoud and Arima, 2011; OECD, 2013). In the last decade, Japanese citizens have become much more involved in several areas of policy making and development decisions like environment protection, infrastructure planning, public health and education management, community development, and running of public assets (Nakano, 2005; Tanaka, 2005).

In the paper we review the nature of public participation in Japan. The aim is to understand the dynamics and nuances of participation in a country with a distinct cultural heritage. A total of 36 papers, published in English, and mostly published after the administrative reforms in 2000, are reviewed. Only papers on public participation in governance are included, which excludes the papers on ‘volunteerism’ which is a popular cultural concept in Japan. Five

databases, namely, ABI Inform: Proquest, EBSCO: Business Source Premier, Elsevier Science, Emerald, and Science Direct were used to identify the relevant papers. The inclusion/exclusion decision was taken in three stages: review of title, review of abstract and review of paper/documents.

Only publications in the English language are reviewed. We acknowledge that several meaningful and relevant articles published only in Japanese have not got included in the review. The paper, therefore, may not be a comprehensive representation of the dynamics of participation in Japan. Nevertheless, the paper does provide cross sectional data of various types of situations faced by the Japanese citizens and the administration, and is one of the first reviews to explore the nature and dynamics of public participation in Japan.

What has persuaded political systems to encourage public involvement in governance?

At a simple level, government strives to improve public services in order to pursue their political goals, and citizens are motivated with the desire for social contribution (Crook and Manor, 1998; Rakodi; 2003; OECD, 2013). The argument for public participation says direct multi-stakeholder decision-making leads to more accountability, better performance and strengthens democracy (Wang, 2001; Tanaka, 2005; Li et al., 2012). Another recent emerging rationale, supported by the economics and developmental literature on sustainability, demonstrates participation of the local communities encouraging a more sustainable and long term productive governance (Few et al., 2007; Deichmann and Lall, 2007; Kim, 2010; O’Leary et al., 2010). Public involvement implies inclusion of pluralism which characterizes the populations today, i.e., opening the decisions to cultural and social diversity, and diverse value systems. The emergent decisions, which combine these diversities guarantees sustainability in practice (Crook and Manor, 1998; Kikuchi, 2010).

The idea of public participation, consequently, is very appealing. However, several

complexities govern this effort. First, the practical challenge of involving multiple stakeholders while balancing their interest is enormous (Treby and Clark, 2004; Atoda and Fukushige, 2000). Second, several decisions require structured scientific examination (Coleman, 2008; Mahmoud and Arima, 2011; Nakano, 2005). For example, construction of highways is dependent on socio-economic analyses and technical feasibility studies as well. Third, legitimacy of the process is a critical concern. Few et al. (2007) and Kim (2010) highlight the necessity of including the appropriate stakeholder (some of them would be hard to reach). Fourth, the balance between formalization and the need for deliberations can create obstacles like process lengthening beyond the time scale, added staff work load, and pressure for additional funds (Tanaka, 2005; Fletcher et al. 2009; Kim 2010). Consequently, public participation, while critical for sustainability, is more than putting the right tools and techniques in place. A substantial resource investment is required, i.e., time, effort, technology, money, and attitude from the administration and the citizens. Public participation, therefore, has had limited empirical and primary investigation internationally, and in Japan as well (Kim, 2010).

Given these complexities, the process of identifying and assigning decisions to be associated with public involvement varies across countries. While in United States public participates from the start of the project, several European Union countries like Austria, Germany and Ireland let the authorities decide on the scope of public participation (Stoker, 1996; Holzer and Kloby, 2005). In developing countries, appeals for public involvement in the policy processes emerged during the 1990s with the advent of economic and administrative reforms and new regulatory structures. Since then several nations like India, China, Nepal, Taiwan and Thailand have adopted policies that encourage public deliberations on development projects and policy decisions in several industries (Shu-chun and Huang, 1998; Manowong and Ogunlana,

2006; Sun et al. 2009). Various formal institutions of participation have been set, for example, mandatory public hearings, free access to information, public scrutiny and feedback on the policy process, public notice of agency decisions and citizen’s right to file objections and concerns as a para-judicial process.

In this article we explore these dynamics and complexities in Japan. We define citizen participation as *direct participation by non-government actors in governmental decision making*. Figure-1 illustrates the spectrum of public participation possibilities. Non government actors include individual citizens, individual companies, public interest groups, economic interest groups, and social groups like women and elderly (Mostert, 2003).

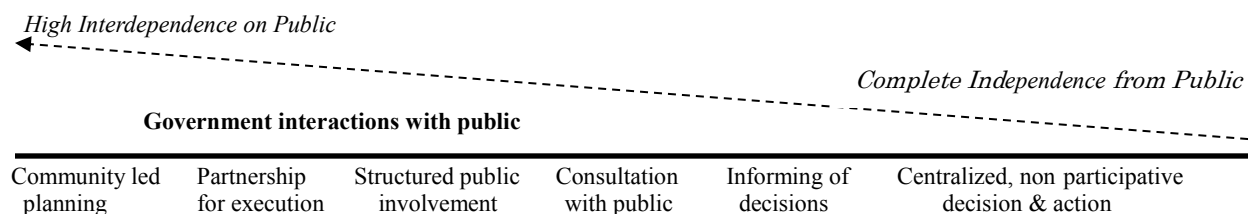


Figure 1: Spectrum of public participation (adapted from Pretty, 1995)

2.0 Methodology

The review steps involved an initial search of ABI INFORM (ABI Proquest) and Emerald Text (Emeraldinsight) using basic strings like public participation, Japan, citizen involvement, citizen and governance, policy frameworks and theories of participation among others. The results identified additional key words some of which were specific to Japan like volunteerism, voluntary participation, decentralization, social contract, and culture. These words were used for second level search on five databases, namely, ABI Inform: Proquest, EBSCO: Business Source Premier, Elsevier Science, Emerald, and Science Direct. The inclusion/exclusion decision was

taken in three stages: review of title, review of abstract and review of paper/documents. Table 1 consolidates the number of papers and the review structure.

Table 1: Number of papers reviewed at each stage

Stage	Included	Excluded
Initial search	54	-
Title analysis	49	5
Abstract analysis	37	12
Paper reading (Japan specific)	36	1
Note, Data search included Elsevier Science and Academic Press Journals, ABI/Inform for Business and Management Journals, Emerald Fulltext Journals, Proquest Science Journals, and EBSCO Database.		

The studies selected for inclusion in the review were: theoretical papers, which gave the frameworks to analyze the results; working papers, which ensured inclusion of current research and understanding; government documents and technical papers, which gave broad, holistic insights into current regulatory structures; and qualitative and quantitative empirical studies, to capture empirical evidence. The papers fall within the following themes, namely, participation in general, voluntarism, cultural context and trust in governments. These themes are elaborated below.

3.0 Literature review

In Japan studies focusing on public participation are few (Lee et al., 2008), especially so are the English publications on this topic. Japan, with its history of top down decision making, finds local people and interest groups generally unaccustomed to this type of process, that is, direct participation. Japanese feel local preferences are best expressed by local elected officials on behalf of their constituencies (Tanaka, 2010). However, the concept of citizen participation is gaining ground and is reviewed in the sections below.

3.1 Participation in general

Kaji (2012) documents the first attempt at public participation as early as the 1930s, and highlights the significance of public participation in solving local and public issues. Itai-Itai disease was first noticed in the Toyama prefecture of central Japan in the 1930s. In the 1960s, the local physician identified cadmium poisoning as the cause of this disease, and with the help of outside experts identified this pollution coming from the local mines. In mid-1960s the citizens of the region united against the mining company and filed a case, which they won in 1972. This case is the first case of public participation in Japan, where the local citizens, outside experts, and the local experts, played an active role to come together and solve a public issue of environmental pollution. The case ended with a pollution control agreement signed by the company.

The 1990s however were a landmark decade for the administration in Japan. After receiving recommendations from the Local Decentralization Promotion Committee (period of office: 1995-2001), the government put in several structures for decentralized governance and public participation at the local level (Cooray, 2013). In July 1999 the Omnibus Decentralization Law came into place which was the first stage of decentralization. This was followed by other reforms in 2001.

Subsequently, the Japanese administration and political agencies have put formal structures for participation at the city council level, in several ways (Cooray, 2013). One, the city council can set up a public committee for discussion and decision on a specific issue. Second, citizens can sit through city council meetings. However, they cannot intervene during the proceedings, unless the individual has received an invitation or sought an invitation. Third, the city council conducts annual meetings of "town week" where the council elaborates on the future

initiatives for the city, and discusses the past achievements as well. These meetings are held at the local community center and can be attended by all citizens. The citizens can ask questions and speak their mind.

Moreover, the city council, which takes several decisions at the local level, consists of members from the local community and they come from all walks of life, for example, academia, police, medical, industry and entrepreneurs (Cooray, 2013). These city council members, however, are typically local, and choose their constituency according to where they are based. The prefecture governor has a strong role in policy making. He is the authority who initiates policy changes, which is then followed by the governors of the cities.

Howard (1999) studied the decision making before the new governance structures, for the forest resources in Japan. The author found professional elite largely determining forest management goals, and cultural barriers minimized broad participation. However, the government was very proactive in sharing their resource management plans with the public and tries to enhance their environmental understanding.

An interesting feature of public participation found by Howard (1999) was the direct investment of citizen's private money in forest plantations. Citizens provide cash for intermediate stand treatments, in exchange for a prorated share of the proceeds upon harvest. While the profits are low there is, however, a sense of doing something to benefit the forest and future generations that overweighs the profit motive. Reed (2008) and Kamo (1997) have also found local government's initiatives and spontaneity been encouraged by the local political parties before the new structures came into place.

However, the political influence of Japanese citizens in policy making is generally considered rather low (Schröder, 2003). Small numbers significantly lower the capacity to create

political pressure and utilizing scale economies in the production of pressure, and this is a cause for concern in Japan. Sanoff (1997) found public participation a relatively new idea in Japan. In the late 1990s planning decisions were usually made at the national level, leaving citizens on the periphery of the decision making process. However, the interest by citizens in applying participation methods in meeting community needs was on a significant increase.

Studies in the last decade discuss the need for more initiatives to encourage citizens to participate. The Japanese public does seem rationally ignorant on the choice of methods of participation (Mishima, 2011). Reasons can be found in the cultural tradition of Japan. Due to its centralized and hierarchical structure historically, the Japanese may be weak in public speaking and feel disempowered as part of the general public (Mishima, 2011). Mori et al. (2008) investigated ways to encourage more participation in voluntary activities and also looked at what motivates people to participate. They hypothesized that having access to opportunities leads to higher participation rates. The hypothesis was proved true. The authors found some sources of information related to the area and specific activities, and connected with participation opportunities had significant positive effects on participation. They clearly establish participation in voluntary activity being related to number of participation opportunities.

Sakurai et al. (2015) studied an urban conservation project in Yokohama, the second largest city in Japan. The author investigated the willingness of residents to participate in five different conservation-related activities, through a survey of residents. The survey suggested recruitment of local residents to participate in community-based management not being easy. Participation was related to an individual's expectation of participation in the conservation activity leading to enhancing social interactions among residents, their belief that the urban area lacked adequate "green" habitat features, such as gardens and other plantings, and their sense of

responsibility to maintain the quality of the environment. Additionally, younger residents were more willing to participate than older residents. The author emphasize social interactions in conservation activities and highlighting the need for and social and aesthetic benefits of conservation improvements could enhance participation in these conservation activities.

3.2 Volunteerism as participation

The Japanese concept of public participation is often conceptualized in the spirit of volunteerism. For example in the Third National Survey of the Natural Environment over 1,00,000 people collected data for the government related to species distribution and abundance (Environment Agency, 1989). Tanaka (2010) found non-governmental volunteers as an essential part of the environment data gathering and planning for the government. City neighborhoods were organized into groups to plant and care for trees. Youth groups and company employees take charge of tending public owned plantations and suburban youth help in forest growth (Shingematsu, 1991). Volunteerism is clearly an important social activity in Japan.

Lee et al. (2008) examined participation in voluntary work among older adults in Japan in order to identify determinants of voluntary participation and reasons for non-participation. Subjects were 593 people from Tokyo in the age range of 60-74 years (60 is the retirement age in Japan). Authors found the most frequent reason to not participate were lack of time and accessibility/no available information. People who participated more were women, people with better health, and people who had lived longer in the community (length of residence). According to the National Survey on Lifestyle Preferences (Economic Planning Agency of Japan, 2000) 37% of the elderly population said they would be very happy to volunteer if they had a chance. The spirit of collective action, see through active volunteerism in Japan, is evident at every stage of pre-planning and the process.

Nakano (2005) and Kida (2013) have found greater number of aged population in a city being positively related to higher voluntarism rates. Nakano (2005) further found city dwellers less likely to get involved in participation, for both genders. Self-employed people also were less likely to participate, compared to the employed. In general having a spouse had a positive effect on volunteering versus single or divorced. As for personal demographics, the author found people with higher education, owning their own house, having a higher income, and who had at least two days off per week participated more in public activities as compared to others.

Mori et al. (2015) modeled the personality factors for a person's active involvement with public participation. They found 'opportunity for participation' as significant along with leisure time (high number of interests) and desire for public service (higher donations). Spare time and income did not emerge significant, further highlighting the importance of opportunity for participation. Mental disposition of the individuals was also found important, captured through positive attitude, along with an outgoing personality. However, culture traditions and beliefs supersede other factors.

3.3 The cultural context

Confucian elements of respect for authority and hierarchy are seen in the social culture and the citizen-state relationship of Japan (Yun, 2006). The Confusion social base of Japan believes in the elected representatives being more suited to decide for the public (Kim, 2010). Even during the post war era, public distrust in the government was centered on the politicians and politics, while the bureaucracy enjoyed high level of trust and respect (Schwartz and Pharr, 2013). The citizens feel the bureaucracy has the best knowledge to enact more coherent policies, are better suited to decide legal policies, and are more thorough in reviewing proposed laws. They can be trusted to do what is right and do consider broad public interest. Andrew and Vries (2007)

studied decentralization and participation in four countries including Japan. Regression analysis highlighted local autonomy had no impact on support seeking behavior of authorities in Japan. Personal influence and problems in the community acted as intervening variables, while personal influence had a positive impact, problems in the community (negative social capital) has a negative impact on citizen participation. Hill and Fujita (2000) examined how Japan governance differs with other western nations and explore theoretical implications. Authors say that Japan fits neither in the recent politico-economic global trends nor in the model put forward by western regulation theorists (that is, transition from a Keynesian welfare state to a Schumpeterian workfare state - necessitated by a shift to a regime of capital accumulation). Unlike other developed nations, Japan has not experienced the decline in state spending, the privatization of activity or rise in inequality between people and local governments. Japan's governance and changes are within a framework rooted in the country's own historic traditions and exigencies (Kida, 2013).

Hence, public participation in Japan can be best understood within its cultural context (Mostert, 2003). Culture here would be the patterns of thought and action that members of a specific group have in common. Culture predisposes individuals towards certain types of behavior and thought (Hofstede, 1991). Citizen participation is impacted indirectly through the nature and level of democracy followed by the citizens. Citizen participation is more likely to be followed in societies with individualistic and egalitarian cultures (Mostert, 2003).

However there are limitations to this argument. In a globalized world citizens partner with other pressure groups who may be from other countries. For example, Thompson et al. (1990) and Herbez et al. (2013) found environmentalists coordinating across the globe for local issues. Furthermore, in Japan, for instance, two types of decisions alternate, the consensus type

which reflects the feminine sub-culture and the warrior type which reflects the masculine culture (Faure, 2001). This makes citizen participation behavior less predictable than culture theories would suggest. According to the World Values Surveys conducted between 1981 and 2000, the Confucian culture of Japan has been moving towards stronger self-expression (Wang and Tan, 2006).

3.4 Trust in the government

Most citizens in Japan believe in the local government and trust them. Kim (2010) looked at public trust in Japan and the rise of citizen intervention. The author found people demonstrating high level of trust in government were also satisfied with the current rights, for example, right to gather, demonstrate, or criticize the government, and were also satisfied with the current level of government's attention to citizen's inputs. The author's analysis using multiple regressions shows the central government's performance in dealing with the economy, political corruption, quality of public service and crime being positively associated with trust in central government. Regarding citizen's perception of empowerment, the participants said if government officials paid attention to citizen's inputs, the trust in them would be higher. However, the citizen's perception of power to influence public policies was not significantly related to trust in the local government.

Broadbent (1988) studied the Oita prefecture and its capital through 500 open ended interviews, and evidence from government records and surveys. He found main public participation initiative constraints come from the local, conservative political parties and the people supporting them. Kida (2013) argued that at the municipal level, where politics is closed to the people, there is an institutional disincentive for citizens to participate. The central government may be wielding too much power in deciding how local governments should run

their municipalities, especially as they control funds and taxes. The municipal governments may just be copying the central government in being centralized in their decision making. The author further asserts for a space for widespread citizen involvement, which is not yet created by most municipalities. Her study of the Oita city shows citizens being prevented from engaging with the government because of the opaque proceedings of the local assembly.

Kida (2013) also talks about moral hazard problem in Japan with regard to public participation, a condition where people neglect to make efforts because of social guarantees they receive from the society. Poor are subsidized by the group to which they belong, corporate failures are few and unemployment has stayed low. People feel secure so long as they are fulfilling their own responsibilities and few are interested in changing the existing system. Therefore public participation is not on high priority for the people and the government.

Mikami's (2015) recent survey of citizens on public participation in energy policy, however found citizens to be aware and also desired to challenge the panelist individual viewpoints and engage with the decision makers to understand their decisions. The author looked at Japan's nuclear and energy policy through the eyes of the citizens. The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire at three points during the process of citizen deliberations. The author found the most citizens were happy to engage actively with the policy makers and desired this at a regular interval.

4.0 Discussion: Culture and social democracy

These studies highlight participation in Japan being significantly influenced by the opportunities present and the access to these opportunities. The theory of social democracy (Dahl 1956, 1972; Lipset 1959) explains these social and institutional conditions that support the legitimacy of

modern democracy, throwing up several variables as significant for public participation efficacy and stability in Japan. The framework discusses the political, social and cultural nuances of democracy.

According to the theory, the society is marked by tension about two aspects: the formal validity of these formal institutions, and their efficiency, which is, the social conditions that allow them to become meaningful (Meyer and Hinchman, 2007). Several conditions play a significant role. One, the theory contends that the establishment of participatory institutions should generate effective participation, that is, responses are actualized in the decision-making (Lipset and Marks, 2000; Meyer and Hinchman, 2007). Literature shows this being a research concern as well. Lack of process effectiveness like information on procedures and funds to encourage participation are seen to undermine the stakeholder's capacity to participate (Mori et al., 2008; Byrne and Govindarajalu 1997; Mansuri and Rao 2004; Manowong and Ogunlana 2006). We find this applicable to Japan. Smaller numbers in public participation are often attributed to lack of information and knowledge, rather than lack of willingness of the citizens.

Two, the theory explains how governance space has diverse actors who are motivated by multiple contexts. People have a range of political, social and cultural interests depending on the specific goals they want to pursue and the rationale desired. However, first, citizens reflexively establish a juridical order (Lipset, 1959; Lipset and Marks, 2000). Any chaos or disorder is temporary and soon falls into an organized structure (Dahl, 1972). The following of cultural and traditional approach to public participation by citizens in Japan is, to some extent, a reflection of the desire for order. Going against established norms and culture can lead to initial chaos and disorder. For the Japanese citizens following of the cultural tradition could be one way of avoiding chaos associated with change.

5.0 Conclusions

The practice of civil society is seen as vital importance to social democracy. Actions in civil society directly fulfil the democratic postulates that citizens should share in the self-direction of society. Literature too highlights civil society groups as significant. Society views them as an important ally. Consequently, civil society may be a good mediator between the citizens and the government, in order to ensure any culturally induced barriers to public participation.

Literature view of public participation in Japan demonstrates a sound governance judgment being encouraged by the Japanese government which believes in cultivating good governance within a representative society. For Japan, a balanced relationship struck among the three components of social order, namely between the civil society, the state, and the citizens could open citizen exploration towards public participation. The steering resource for this alliance will be the level of civil competence and the availability of social and institutional conditions to drive meaningful participation.

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