

Research on Resident Participation in the Implementation of Community Policies in Mitaka City — A Study on Local Resident Participation in the Context of Japan’s Macro Community Policies

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Abstract: *In the 1960s, Japan’s rapid economic development brought about various social issues, with the "society of disconnectedness" problem standing out in particular. To address this, the Japanese government introduced comprehensive community policies, calling on local governments to enhance resident participation in communities and to develop localized resident participation systems. This approach aimed to mobilize community strength, strengthen self-governance, and achieve comprehensive community autonomy. This policy is referred to as the "community policy initiative" in Japanese research; here, it is interpreted as Japan’s macro community policy (referred to as macro policy hereafter). Macro policy emphasizes the "fostering" of community resident participation systems, meaning the development of feasible, location-specific systems for resident participation that can be continuously refined and improved in practice. The goal is to increase resident participation rates, enhance the quality of participation, and achieve comprehensive and high-quality resident involvement. Under this policy, Mitaka City, located in the central area of Tokyo, has become a model community for Japan’s community policies after decades of community-building adjustments. The resident participation model of Mitaka City and the historical changes in its community engagement form the core focus of this study.*

Keywords: *community policy; street construction; resident participation system; district workshop*

1. Introduction

Japan’s macro community policy (hereafter referred to as macro policy) can be considered one of the earliest community autonomy policies implemented in Asia. To address various social issues, such as an aging population and low birth rates, the policy initially included the "Heisei Great Mergers," which restructured administrative divisions. This involved merging multiple smaller self-governing districts into larger autonomous communities based on local characteristics. The objective was to consolidate political resources across regions to facilitate the smooth implementation of macro policies[1].

Community policies can be categorized into three types: "government-led," "decentralized," and "hybrid." Japan’s macro policy is clearly a hybrid model, emphasizing local autonomy while incorporating government oversight. This hybrid type is also commonly seen in developed countries and regions[2].

In fact, the term "community" only became widely recognized and popular in Japanese society after the Great Mergers. Particularly with the successful experience of Mitaka City, community development began to flourish in other regions. Japanese domestic research frequently mentions the concept of "spontaneity." As infrastructure in neighborhoods improved, addressing issues related to environment, housing, and healthcare, local residents began, under government guidance, to contemplate local development and the issues facing their communities. They organized various civic movements on their own initiative to address local issues.

Among these initiatives, Mitaka City’s "district workshops" played an indispensable role. District workshops are the most critical element of resident participation in Mitaka City. Through nearly 60 years of multiple rounds of reform, district workshops have developed the capabilities to deeply explore residents’ needs, analyze the situation in neighborhoods in depth, and make rational use of resources to conduct citizen-led activities.

2. Investigation into Japan's Macro Policy

2.1 Communities Overflowing with a Sense of Loneliness Due to Urbanization

In the 1960s, Japan's wave of urbanization drove economic growth but also led to various social problems caused by shifts in public consciousness. These issues manifested in two primary ways: first, urban development disrupted traditional order, establishing new production and consumption systems that drastically impacted established norms. This resulted in stratified populations and increasingly inequitable resource distribution within cities, leading to social tensions. Second, surrounding communities faced a shortage of human resources and, under the influence of urbanization, saw a shift in residents' attitudes, which greatly affected communities reliant on traditional orders for survival.

Today, Tokyo is often promoted as a "city where modernity and tradition coexist," and traditional neighborhoods are preserved through civic movements. However, prior to the implementation of the macro policy, surveys indicated that urbanization led residents to perceive life in the city as fast-paced and monotonous, with populations in surrounding neighborhoods sharply declining and development stagnating, giving the city a lifeless appearance. Cities and neighborhoods were gradually losing their original humanistic ecological environment, weakening the mutual assistance once inherent in communities. Neighborhoods rich in cultural resources and shared beliefs began to fade, imparting a profound sense of loneliness across urban communities[3].

According to a 1969 report by the National Life Council, liberalism and individualism gained popularity amidst urbanization, significantly impacting traditional community structures. Japan's macro policy sought to address this extreme wave of individualism, aiming to restore the order of traditional communities to a certain degree and facilitate a humanistic development that could keep pace with urbanization[4].

2.2 Basic Situation of Community Policy Implementation in Mitaka City

Mitaka City, as an urban district in the city center, faced similar challenges from urbanization. Starting in 1955, under the administration of its third mayor, Heisaburo Suzuki, Mitaka City focused on infrastructure improvements. Suzuki prioritized city sanitation and public health, achieving 100% sewer coverage and establishing citizen health records. By 1971, with the completion of universal sewer access and citizen health records, Mayor Suzuki turned his attention to establishing resident self-governance, marking the beginning of community-building efforts.

Amidst the vast impact of urbanization, restoring the original order became a significant challenge. After a study visit to Germany, Mayor Suzuki framed Mitaka's community development as "community creation," signifying a restoration from scratch, rebuilding Mitaka's community collective along the lines of traditional customs and practices.

3. The Three Basic Community Development Plans in Mitaka City

After Mayor Suzuki stepped down, Mitaka City underwent three rounds of basic community development planning from 1975 to 2015, with each plan being revised approximately every 12 years and a four-year preparatory period for each revision.

3.1 Initiation of the First Basic Plan

In 1973, prior to the implementation of the first basic plan, the Osawa Community Research Association was established, laying the groundwork for this initial plan. A central tenet at the time was that rebuilding social connections required the establishment of a highly feasible resident participation system, making this the core focus of the first basic plan[5]. Concurrently, a Residents' Council was also established, which, in certain respects, shares functions with community resident committees in China.

To promote resident participation, the Osawa Community Research Association, alongside the Residents' Council and other organizations, created a resident participation system of that period. I have represented this system in a chart (see Figure 1).

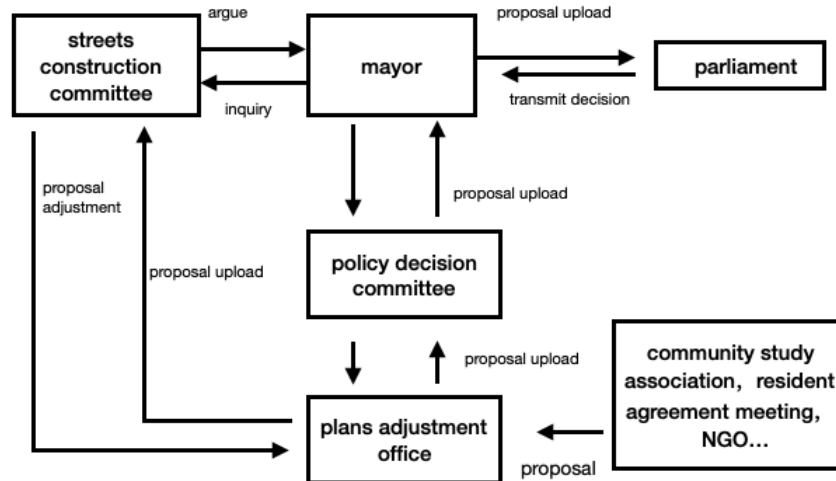


Figure 1: Resident Participation System

From the chart, we see that the first basic plan in Mitaka City relied on organizations like the Community Research Association to construct a feedback channel for resident opinions. The administrative bodies within this system included: the Planning Adjustment Office, the Decision-Making Committee, the City Council, and the Street Construction Committee, with the mayor serving as the central figure in all administrative operations. However, the system had a notable drawback: its administrative processes were overly complex, which hindered timely communication and information flow among residents within the self-governing community. Identifying this issue prompted the development of the second basic plan.

3.2 The Second Basic Plan

During the plan revision discussions that began in 1986, a “community case study” approach was used to diagnose issues in Mitaka City's community development. The main problems identified were: first, an excessive number of administrative bodies involved, which hindered communication; second, a low level of expertise and organizational inefficiency within the Residents' Council; and third, the council's inability to represent local needs.

Based on this diagnosis, the following adjustments were made in the second basic plan: The Street Construction Committee was dissolved and replaced by the “Long-Term Planning Citizen Review Meeting,” with members elected from residents, eliminating the previous proposal procedures.

The composition of the Residents' Council was modified to include more professionals.

The second basic plan removed unnecessary layers within the administrative system, improving the efficiency of most agencies and achieving a “deliberation-enhanced” community system. However, the structure remained largely similar to that of the first basic plan, serving primarily as a transitional phase before the third basic plan.

3.3 The Third Basic Plan and the “Citizen 21 Conference”

The main criticisms of the first two basic plans were their “rigid institutional participation” and “ineffective communication.” Applying administrative methods to resident participation in community development proved to be inappropriate. Recognizing this as the core issue, Mitaka City decided to overhaul the system in the third basic plan, introducing the concept of the “Citizen 21 Conference” (referred to as the 21 Conference). The number “21” in the 21 Conference symbolizes the 21st century, aligning with the plan's implementation beginning in 2001 and marking the launch of a new resident participation system for the new century.

To address issues such as rigid institutional participation, it was essential to establish a direct dialogue platform—this platform became the “District Workshop.” The District Workshop first categorized the administrative issues within each neighborhood. In Mitaka City, based on local characteristics, ten specialized committees were created (see Table 1).

Table 1: Ten Specialized Committees

First Committee	Urban Infrastructure Committee	Sixth Committee	Peace & Human Rights Committee
Second Committee	Community Safety Committee	Seventh Committee	Resident Participation & NPO Support Committee
Third Committee	Community Education Committee	Eighth Committee	Information Policy Committee
Fourth Committee	Convenient Living Committee	Ninth Committee	Local Government Operations Committee
Fifth Committee	Urban Revitalization Committee	Tenth Committee	Neighborhood Street Development Committee

The primary role of each committee was not to administer its respective topic within the district but to facilitate a theme-based, de-administrative dialogue. Residents could approach the relevant committee to raise and discuss issues of interest. Regular resident meetings were held, with approximately one hundred residents selected randomly to participate, and the participant list was publicly announced.

The innovative approach attracted many enthusiastic residents, with an initial participation count reaching 375 people. Subsequently, the committee format was adopted across various communities, and within the first year, a total of 454 resident meetings were held in Mitaka City. This achieved large-scale resident engagement and set a new precedent for community-building participation.

The main achievements of the 21 Conference can be summarized in two points: First, Issues were broken down into specific topics and discussed through a model of open, continuous public dialogue. This made issues accessible to the public, no longer confined to narrow administrative channels, and gave residents a strong sense of involvement. Second, The open resident meetings fostered greater exchange of ideas and mutual learning, breaking down social isolation among residents. This to some extent restored the original sense of community and contributed to overall community growth.

To ensure the smooth, long-term operation of these resident meetings, Mitaka City carefully planned the participation process for resident meetings. Based on available materials, I have created a flowchart illustrating the 21 Conference participation process (see Figure 2).

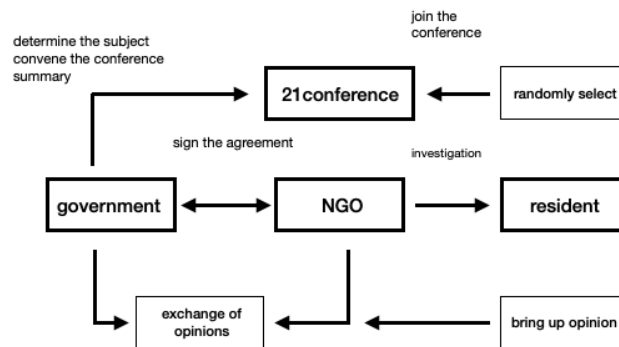


Figure 2: Participation Process of the 21 Conference

The 21 Conference flowchart shows clearly defined roles for the government and local organizations, presenting an open platform for resident discussions, which was a bold initiative. The current fourth basic plan continues to use the 21 Conference as its foundational model.

4. Summary of Community Development in Mitaka City and Insights for Community Building in China

4.1 Advantages of the 21 Conference in Mitaka City

The development of the 21 Conference in Mitaka City was built on thorough research, sound reasoning, and bold restructuring of the traditional administrative system. Tailored to local needs, it established a practical model for resident participation. The key advantages are as follows:

(1) The government's role in community development was clearly delineated, significantly reducing the high communication costs associated with complex administrative systems and lengthy procedures. This enabled the government to connect directly with residents through local groups, establishing clear, accurate channels for information.

(2) The creation of specialized committees facilitated better categorization of information, minimizing ineffective proposals and guiding residents to provide constructive feedback on relevant issues.

(3) Local groups were empowered to take on social responsibilities, forming a communication bridge between the government and residents through which issues and needs could be effectively addressed.

(4) Open resident meetings enhanced community learning. With increased participation in the 21 Conference, the volume of shared information rose, creating more opportunities for mutual learning among residents. This model reduced community education costs and broadened information-sharing channels.

4.2 Insights from Mitaka City's Community Development

Under the guidance of macro policies, Mitaka City built a viable resident participation system tailored to local conditions through continuous exploration. Key insights from this process can provide effective references for community building in China.

First, Community development requires a long-term perspective, aligned with local characteristics. Five- or ten-year plans should be established, with clear milestones. Detailed observations and records during each phase can serve as valuable evidence for future revisions.

Second, Local organizations should be strategically positioned to fulfill their roles within the community framework. These groups can simplify administrative procedures, reduce costs, and strengthen connections between the government and local residents. This approach widens communication channels, improves the speed of information transmission, and enhances the accuracy of information.

Third, The specialized committee model demonstrates that categorizing information sources aids in the effective collection of relevant information. This method also guides residents toward constructive feedback, focusing on community issues that need addressing.

5. Conclusion

Comparing community development across different regions and countries holds significant theoretical and practical value. In China, facing rapid urbanization and increasing population mobility, many social issues have arisen. At the core of these issues lies the sense of alienation from the new order and a strong dependence on the old one. By studying Mitaka City, we have learned that building a viable resident participation system must be grounded in local realities, based on local culture, and proceed with a carefully planned strategy. Practically, this means identifying needs and revising the system through continuous cycles of "investigation-research-practice-summary," which strengthens the professionalism of the community-building team and enhances its overall quality, allowing the community development plans to advance steadily.

On the operational level, Mitaka City's ten specialized committees provide a solid framework for implementation. By categorizing the issues that need to be addressed in community governance and guiding residents in presenting their concerns, this approach successfully categorizes information, broadens communication channels, improves the accuracy of information exchange, and strengthens the connection between the local government and residents.

This study, focusing on international community-building models, provides new insights and offers a valuable reference for China's community development approach. However, the practical model proposed in this research still faces some unresolved issues: The roles, objectives, and attributes of social organizations differ between countries. Can social organizations in China effectively build bridges between residents and the government in community development? Is broad-based participation suitable for China's national context?

To address these issues, the following approaches are proposed: (1) Conduct in-depth surveys to explore various social organizations, select those that best meet local residents' interests and needs, and attempt to involve these organizations in community development under the guidance of the government. (2) Conduct small-scale community discussions led by professionals within the community. This will collect residents' views and give an overview of community conditions while testing the adaptability of Mitaka's district workshop model in China's domestic environment.

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