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Research on urban community building in Sapporo: challenges and implications of a local festival

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Abstract: As such terms as *tsunagari* and *kizuna* are buzzwords, one major issue which sociology considers today is the need for community particularly in urban local areas. There are various factors behind this, such as the severe lessons from the great earthquakes, risks of social isolation and death in isolation, and increasing lone older residents; these all point to the vulnerability of our social life without readily available meaningful social relations. However, while the importance of community is highlighted, what community actually is and how it can be built have not been sufficiently addressed, thereby making community a useful but vague and overused concept. Thus, this paper deals with these issues with a focus on Sapporo, referring to a few sociological theories of community, Sapporo's statistical data, and qualitative and quantitative data that the author has obtained during recent fieldwork.

The paper first critically discusses the sociological concept of community, before putting forward three phases of community building. With reference to these phases, it then looks at the current framework for community building in Sapporo, and points out a few challenges involved in it due to which the framework has not functioned as expected. Following this, the paper analyses a local festival in the Soen area in the city; it is an area that attracts attention of both urban researchers and city planning officials alike because of a variety of voluntary community building initiatives underway. This paper considers the festival's unique features and their implications for a successful renewal of locality-based community building. The implications are related to the agency of community building, participants, and functions of a local social system.

As presented in the paper, the findings of this research are of general usefulness and applicable to other urban areas. However, since community is something that individuals concerned with a given locality collectively build, it requires their continuous efforts and commitment. As the festival in question also has room for improvement, community as an ideal type may not be built perfectly, but the essence of community building is its contribution towards local people's social relations and sense of ownership towards the area; the realisation of it is the very key to tackling challenges facing contemporary urban local areas.

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1. Introduction

Sociology deals with myriads of issues. As our society diversifies the scope of sociology widens, but the traditional focus of sociological research remains on the realisation of meaningful social relations. From the perspective of community sociology, the present paper considers how such social relations can be developed in urban areas today.

The paper first critically discusses the sociological concept of community. In doing so, it points out the continuing significance of locality-based community despite the relatively recent attention to a type of community or social relations characterised by expanding personal networks across and beyond localities. After putting forward three phases of community building, it examines the current framework of community building in Sapporo and its structural challenges. It will then discuss a case of local festival in the Soen area in the central ward of Sapporo and its unique features and implications; the discussions refer to some qualitative and quantitative data the author has obtained by working as a steering committee member of the festival in 2013. This paper argues that although the festival has some room for improvement, the research findings about its success indicate a possible renewal and direction of practical urban community building.

2. Rethinking community: its theoretical components and real-life challenges

2.1 Community as a three-phase process

Social relations are at the core of human society, and the main task of sociology is to consider how they are developed. In this regard, the sociologically traditional concept of community is of great relevance because community constitutes the fundamental part of our social life, providing us with an essential feeling of connectedness, belonging, and meaning (Chirstensen & Levinson 2003). However, this concept has been interpreted and used in a number of different ways, technically and non-technically; it is even regarded as 'an omnibus word embracing a motley assortment of concepts and qualitatively different phenomena' (Dixon 1999: 288)[1]. In fact, this indiscriminate use of the concept is partly due to the relatively recent attention to the so-called liberation of community that has brought about new types of personal networks across and beyond urban localities (Wellman 1994; Morioka 2000; Akaeda 2011).

Notwithstanding the theoretical vagueness and confusion, locality-based community in particular has been considered practically important and relevant in contemporary Japan, and therefore this paper focuses on how it can be promoted. There seem to be three points related to this revival of locality-based community; these, as mentioned below, are all related to the recent buzzwords '*tsunagari*' and '*kizuna*' which respectively mean social relations and connectedness —the essence of community. A first point is the lessons learnt from the great earthquakes in 1995 and 2011. It is widely known that 70–80% of the survivors were rescued by their neighbours, and that neighbourhood associations among other agencies indeed played a pivotal role in relief activities at evacuation centres. Consequently, the disasters got people to realise that even chances of survival depend on locality-based social relations. A second point is associated with social isolation and death in isolation. It is argued that these have become major social problems due to declining locality-based social relations, as well as the ongoing individualisation (Suzuki

et. al. 2010). A third point is related to the ageing population. Japan is the most rapidly ageing country in the world, and the facilitation of social relations for and among senior citizens through local social participation is a high priority task as it can significantly promote their quality of life (Morishita 2013a). Because of these points, there is people's renewed attention to locality-based community today.

As seen above, community is considered important both theoretically and practically, despite the fact that it has been used as a plastic word. In order to discuss issues around community, it is crucial to be clear about what community denotes in the first place. Since MacIver (1917), who is the pioneer of community research, first defined community as 'any area of common life,' there has been quite a little research on it. For instance, Hillery (1955) who examined 94 definitions of community pointed out three common components, namely, 1) a geographically circumscribed area; 2) social interaction among people in the area; and 3) a sense of belonging among the people. While these components are useful for judging whether community is established, the question as to how community is built remains unanswered. As the significance of locality-based community is now widely rethought and highlighted, what is required is to clarify the process of community revitalisation/building.

Since creating community—or more generally, meaningful social relations—is an interdisciplinary topic, ideas are discussed and shared by researchers and practitioners in a variety of disciplines (Iyotani *et. al.* 2013). One idea referred to across disciplinary boundaries is that of Henry Ford's below:

Table 1: Three phases of community

1. Coming together is a beginning.
2. Keeping together is progress.
3. Working together is success.

These succinct phases are of general usefulness to considerations of community building and adopted as they are in several sociological papers[(2)]. However, how each phase happens is to be mentioned for this idea to be of more practical use. Having reviewed theoretical studies of community and conducted field research on urban community building, the author has come to argue that the following phases constitute the process of practical community building.

Table 2: Three phases of community building

1. Sharing of purposes/objectives among people in a given area
2. Accumulation of collaborative experiences among people
3. Fostering of people's sense of connectedness and belonging to the area

It is ideal if people automatically come together. However, in real-life cases, people living in the same area do not necessarily do so due to difficulties in identifying common purposes/objectives and/or in initiating collective actions, thereby often resulting in a 'pseudo-happy community'[(3)]. Thus, identifying and sharing purposes/objectives and realising collectiveness among people in a given area should come first, although it is often a challenge because of today's

diversifying needs and interests in urban areas. Second, the basis of community should be formed through the accumulation of participants' collaborative experiences; this in turn contributes towards generating what Putnam (2001) calls social capital, facilitating sustained efforts to achieve the common purpose/objective. Third, participants playing their respective roles in the collaborative process will come to have feelings of connectedness and belonging to the area.

With reference to these phases, the following section examines the current framework for community building in Sapporo.

2.2 Sapporo's current framework for community building

A number of cities in Japan are concerned with locality-based community building and Sapporo is no exception. Over the past decade or so the city has introduced various bylaws and schemes, the most noteworthy of which is the inauguration of the community centres in 87 areas which basically correspond to the secondary school districts in the city[(4)]. One of the newly designated main functions of the centres is to facilitate collaborative community building activities by residential members of varied associations operating in each area.

To what extent is the centre serving the objective of locality-based community building? Figure 1 below shows a steady increase in the number of locality-based collaborative community building activities facilitated by the community centres, particularly after the inauguration in 2006. A geographical area covered by each centre is relatively wide, containing locality-based associations, such as neighbourhood associations, PTAs, support groups for children/the elderly, and so on. These associations have different functions but the centres seem to be playing a role in identifying common purposes/objectives and facilitate collaboration among these specialised associations.

Sociological studies point out that community building efforts through inter-association collaboration in an area roughly the size of a secondary school district is the most practical today. This is because of diversifying local needs that require the involvement of multiple associations (Morioka 2008). Individual-level chances of local social interaction and participation through such inter-association collaboration are also meaningful; many people in urban areas are locality-based when it comes to their willingness to participate in community building. In fact, 77.4% of 530 respondents to a questionnaire survey the author co-conducted in the central ward of Sapporo

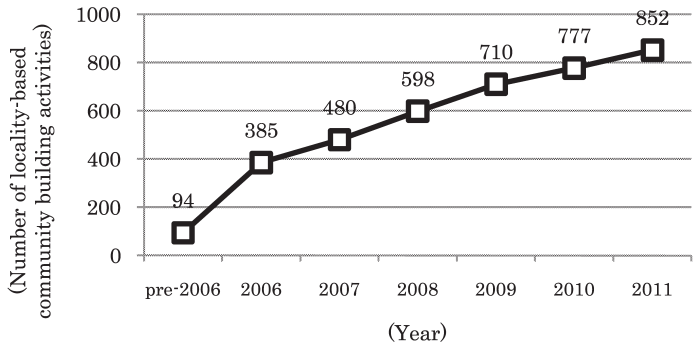

Figure 1: Number of locality-based community building activities
Source: Sapporo City (2011)

in September 2013 associated community building with geographical areas of the same size as or smaller than a secondary school district. This empirically indicates the continuing relevance of locality-based community despite the recent expansion of personal networks across urban areas.

With that said, Sapporo's framework for community building has structural challenges, two of which are briefly mentioned here. First, although the community centres have been in place for several years now, over 60% of the citizens are still not familiar with what the centres do (Sapporo City 2010). It is hoped that people will take part in the centre's activities via conventional neighbourhood associations and/or growing associations such as NPOs that can offer alternative/additional opportunities for locality-based participation[6]; and that the centres will gain more recognition and popularity. However, neighbourhood associations have been declining[5]. As well, generally people's involvement with NPOs and the like is in its infancy (Sapporo City 2013a), and many NPOs' activities are issue-specific and not necessarily locality-based. Thus, inter-association sharing of purposes/objectives in local areas remains a challenge, thereby making locality-based accumulations of experiences a difficult task.

Second, despite the decline, neighbourhood associations are officially positioned at the core of inter-association collaboration organised at the centre. This seems reasonable given the fact that the association, which is open to all residents and democratically represents each neighbourhood, has long and legitimately served as the node of locality-based social relations in Japan. In Sapporo, there are more than 2,200 neighbourhood associations throughout the city and 71.7% of all households belong to neighbourhood associations. Yet it is important to note here that having neighbourhood associations at the core of the community centre's activities in turn means that people are to be active members of their local neighbourhood associations in the first place. This is in order for them to participate in inter-association activities that are virtually led by neighbourhood associations. Yet, Sapporo's general survey on neighbourhood associations conducted in 2011 reports that as low as 20% or less of all the members actually participate in activities organised by their local associations. This implies that the vast majority of people, whether they are members of neighbourhood associations or not, have limited access to inter-association collaborative activities at the centre.

Thus, as pointed out above, in addition to the difficulty in sharing locality-based purposes/objectives, chances of association/individual-level interaction, let alone accumulation thereof, are inevitably limited. Figure 2 below illustrates these structural challenges of the current frame-

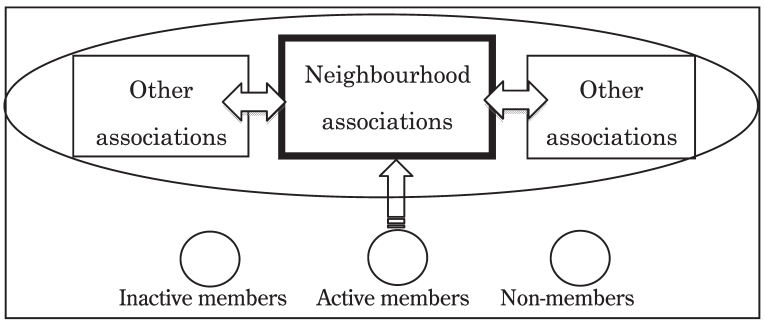

Figure 2: Structure of Sapporo's inter-association community building

work for community building in Sapporo.

3. Renewal of locality-based community building

3.1 Features of a new local festival in the Soen area

As presented above, locality-based community building has been promoted throughout Sapporo but its framework has structural challenges. There are additional factors that are considered as having negative impacts on community building, such as the increasing mobility of people and diversity in local areas and the growing number of people in small-sized households among others (Morishita 2013b).

The Soen area that the author has been researching[7] is also faced with these challenges (see Table 3). However, there are successful community building initiatives in the area[8], attracting attention of urban researchers and city planning officials concerned with community building. One such initiative is the '*Mini-odori Promenade Festival*' that has been held on an early autumn Sunday every year since 2010. The festival takes place along the Mini-odori promenade that is about 900m-long east and west in the south of the Soen area, and the 4th festival took place on the 8th of September 2013. There were several venues around the promenade, such as a flea market, a food court, an outdoor stage, and food markets, and the number of stalls exceeded 60. Also, around 65 local shops and companies, as well as Sapporo City, supported the festival financially, materially, and logistically. The festival is now recognised as one of the main annual events in the Soen area and some 26,000 people came to enjoy this local event in 2013 (see Photographs 1 & 2).

Having worked as one of the 27 members of the festival's steering committee for several months in 2013, the author argues below that this festival has unique features with implications

Table 3: Selected characteristics of the Soen area (Sapporo average)

- Percentage of households belonging to neighbourhood association: **57.4%** (71.7%)
- Number of people living in one household as of 01 Oct 2013: **1.76 persons** (1.92 persons)
- Permillage of social increase of population: **38.3‰** (3.5‰)

Source: Sapporo Official Statistics (various years)

Photograph 1: Visitors enjoying music

Photograph 2: Visitors at the flea market

for a renewal of locality-based community building today.

1) The start of the event: The festival started in 2010 under the leadership of a few resident retirees and several local residents/shop owners who had been concerned with the vitalisation of locality-based community with new initiatives; the objective of making the festival a success was shared among the leaders. (phase 1 of community building).

Some of the leaders were members of neighbourhood associations but the festival was planned and organised as a completely independent project. According to some of the interviewees, the leaders first approached the neighbourhood associations around the promenade but they were not able to have these associations involved as much as they had expected. In fact, this was to do with the general characteristics of the neighbourhood association in recent years; neighbourhood associations tend to be so well structured that they are often reluctant to take up new functions unless thoroughly discussed and approved at official meetings well in advance. Furthermore, since some of the festival leaders were not members of the neighbourhood associations, they first needed to build mutual trust with the associations' executive members to share the objective of the festival. Thus, this novel event had to be prepared from scratch, but being remotely associated with neighbourhood associations, it consequently had considerable flexibility that made itself open to anyone interested.

2) Locality-based participation: A second feature is that anyone can join the steering committee as long as they go to school, live, or work in the Soen area; whether they are members of neighbourhood associations is not an issue. This has brought a group of innovative and committed individuals from a range of backgrounds with some core members who are shop/company owners/employees based in the area[9]. In addition, a total of 100 people, mostly affiliated with various local associations, joined the festival as volunteers. The majority of these volunteers attended briefing sessions and preparations prior to the festival and wrap-up meetings after the festival; some of them even participated in inter-association clean-up events along the promenade that were held several times prior to the festival with 10–15 people in total joining each time. This series of opportunities for social interactions and participation realised the collectiveness and accumulation of collaborative experiences among the volunteers from different backgrounds, workplaces, or schools, towards making the festival a success (phase 2 of community building).

The festival has also fostered local residents' senses of attachment and belonging to the Soen area, leading to the establishment of another group called Soen Koryu Network with about 30 resident members (phase 3 of community building). Since 2011, this group has initiated a variety of locality-based activities (e.g., cooking classes, seminars, clean-up events, flea markets and the like), providing opportunities for social interaction and participation for residents throughout the year.

3) The relationship to the community centre: Another feature is the festival committee's relationship to the community centre. In principle, the aim of the centres is to facilitate collaboration among local associations, so that local residents will gain experiences in self-governance and eventually deal with local issues by themselves. In the case of the festival, however, the steering committee played the role of the facilitator for the participant associations, and also actively took advantage of the centre's resources. For instance, the committee efficiently

gathered information about financial support of Sapporo City, managed through a variety of bureaucratic procedures involved in the preparations of the festival together with the centre's staff, and made use of equipment at the centre, and so on. For the current and future members of the committee, these hands-on experiences and know-how are invaluable assets applicable to future festivals and other locality-based community building activities.

3.2 The festival's implications for a renewal of community building

As described above, the festival in question has been successful. Of course, the festival does have room for improvement. For instance, as the festival grows and gains more recognition, responsibilities of committee members have increased and are excessive at times. This seems to be one of the factors that members change every year. The positive side of this is that new members with fresh perspectives join the committee every year, but a difficulty in task sharing among the few long-term members and new ones tends to be an issue. The committee should probably consider involving local associations, such as schools, companies, shops, etc. in the practical project management, rather than mainly relying on them for support, festival stalls, and volunteers and so forth; this is in order for the committee not to bear all the increasing responsibilities and to ensure its stable steering of the festival. Also, while the festival will need to keep working with local associations, it should also provide opportunities for those residents with no affiliation with associations to take part in the festival in various other ways than just as visitors to the festival[10].

Despite all the above-mentioned issues, it still is fair to state that the festival is a successful example of locality-based community building with unique features. What implications do these features have for community building? One of the implications seems to be related to functions of a local social system and suggests a direction of renewed community building. Table 4 below lists four main functions of a local social system. As touched upon earlier, in Japan quasi-public neighbourhood associations have conventionally been responsible for the functions, and provided locals with opportunities for social interactions and participation through the example activities given under each function.

However, as their constant decline indicates, neighbourhood associations are no longer expected to perform all these functions. For instance, Adaptation in particular is becoming less significant than before, in part due to the growth of privately available alternative goods and services. In fact, this tendency is clearly seen in the results of the aforementioned questionnaire survey the author co-conducted (see Figure 3 which shows the respondents' interest in the respective functions of a local social system). Also, while 20.9% of the respondents have an interest in Goal attainment, almost all the rest of them show an interest in Integration and

Table 4: Basic functions of a local social system (based on the AGIL paradigm of Parsons)

Adaptation:	Negotiation/collaboration with the authority
Goal attainment:	Cleaning, snow removal, neighbourhood watch
Integration:	Collaborative/intergenerational activities
Latency:	Local festivals and events

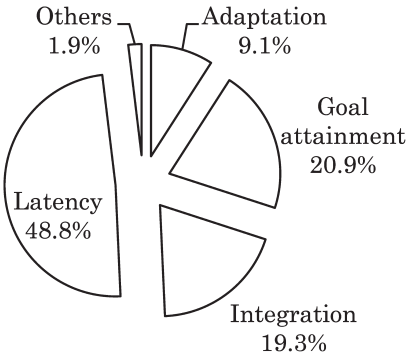

Figure 3: Respondents' interest in different functions of a local social system (based on the AGIL paradigm)

Note: Multiple choice, a total of 627 answers obtained.

Latency, that is, leisure-type activities. It can be argued that people's expectation of a local social system have narrowed down, and this explains why the leisure-type festival in the Soen area has been a success, involving a number of people in a range of festival-related activities.

In this sense, the festival seems to indicate one possible renewal of urban community building. The author's survey results actually show that 77.2% of the respondents are not participating in any locality-based activities but willing to do so if there are opportunities (see Figure 4). Therefore, in today's urban areas it is worth attempting a renewal of locality-based community building with a focus on leisure-type activities. The festival in question that independently started from scratch in the local area of Soen certainly is supporting evidence of this argument.

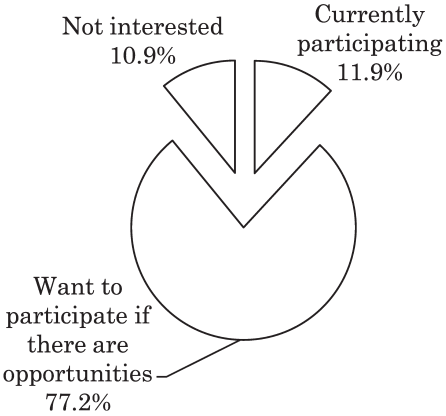

Figure 4: Respondents' willingness to participate in locality-based activities

Note: 513 answers obtained.

4. Concluding remarks

Following the tradition of sociology that has considered how social relations are realised, this paper has discussed issues around locality-based community in contemporary urban areas. After rethinking the revival of community from theoretical and practical perspectives, it proposed

a process of community building, with reference to which a few major challenges for the current framework for community building in Sapporo were pointed out.

It then analysed a local festival in the Soen area as a successful renewal of community building indicating features and implications relevant to today's urban areas. There are factors that have made the festival a success in relation to the proposed process of community building, such as the committed individuals, supportive local businesses and associations, as well as the promenade itself as a given local asset. It is important to note that the Soen area, as is often the case with urban areas in general, also has traits which are considered having unfavourable impacts on community building. Still, it has proven that community building as a process can happen in today's urban areas, by taking advantage of locally available resources and assets, rather than being bound by the conventional local social system or structure; the findings in turn suggest a shift of attention of urban community research which has tended to be concerned with restoring or reviving, not necessarily building anew, community in urban areas.

In contemporary Japan, locality-based community building certainly is an issue in many urban areas that have myriads of different traits. The process of community building as an ideal type, which this paper puts forward and applied to the analyses, should serve as a reference point of general usefulness. Furthermore, the case of the festival points to the prospect of locality-based community in urban areas.

As presented in the case of the festival, practical community building requires continuous efforts and commitment of individuals concerned with a local area, which ultimately fosters their collective social relations and sense of ownership towards the area; this is the very essence of community building that increases the local area's resilience to various challenges. Even so, it is premature to propose a complete model of community building generally applicable to diverse urban areas, and thus analyses of other cases are necessary. In addition, research into the mechanism that can trigger practical community building in other cases will further contribute towards polishing the findings of the present study and enriching urban community studies.

Notes

(1) Yoshihara (2011) describes the recently increasing discussions about community as 'community inflation.'
(2) For example, see Kaneko (2013) among his other publications.
(3) This is a term the author coined to describe an area that is seemingly problem-free and happy but actually faced with challenges that are mostly hidden or unnoticeable at first sight, such as social isolation, lack of communication, and the like. These challenges require tackling but are often left unaddressed due to the absence of community.
(4) See Morishita (2013a; 2013b) for an overview of Sapporo's community building initiatives.
(5) In 1989, 83.0% of all households in Sapporo belonged to neighbourhood associations but it decreased to 71.1% in 2013 (taken from Sapporo City's data entitled '*Chounaikai/Jichikai no kanyu joukyou*' dated 01 January 2013).
(6) The number of officially registered NPOs has increased from 2 in 1998 to 741 in 2010, but more than 85% of the citizens have never been involved with any NPO (Sapporo City 2013b).
(7) The Soen area is in the central ward with a population of about 27,000.
(8) See Morishita (2013a; 2013b) for details of the author's participant observation of and interviews with Sasaetai which is another successful community building initiative in the Soen area.
(9) According to the data the author obtained from the community centre, the number of shops/companies is the

6th biggest in the Soen area, out of all the 87 areas of Sapporo.

(10) This is based on comments of some visitors and volunteers the author interviewed, a few of whom said they wanted to have a section for their handicrafts, performance, and the like.

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