

## EXPLORING COMMUNAL CIVIL SOCIETY IN ASIA: CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

OCTOBER 11, 2013 (UNIVERSITY OF TSUKUBA, JAPAN)

INTERNATIONAL ROUND-TABLE SEMINAR ORGANIZED BY  
CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL, COMPARATIVE AND ADVANCED JAPANESE STUDIES (CAJS) &  
SPECIAL PROGRAM FOR CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES (SPCA) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TSUKUBA,  
CENTRAL ASIAN DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE (CADI) & GERDA HENKEL FOUNDATION

Communal civil society, also known as “community-based organizations” to Western donor institutions, have often been overlooked as a space for facilitating the development of a nascent civil society. And given the fluid nature of the liberal associations and non-governmental organisations, these community-based civil society organizations have persisted for hundreds of years in various regions of the world, predominantly in Asia, and are considered to be the basis for any form of citizen collective action. Although most of the communal civil society organisations in different parts of the continent work within or related to the realm located in the family and community networks, yet each of them possesses a unique set of features depending on different factors of a given locality.

In their welcome speeches, **Murod Ismailov, Senior Research Fellow at CADI** and **Toshinobu Usuyama, ICCARE Director** have reiterated that the aim of the seminar was to bring together academics and practitioners from different parts of Asia and reinvigorate a debate of the impact of community-based civil society. The latter was defined as a geographically limited voluntary social interaction in which individuals exchange information, deliberate collective action, promote interests of the community through advocacy, enable the provision of goods and services, and serve as an informal institution for conflict prevention and resolution.



The participants of the workshop seminar were encouraged to elaborate on the theoretical and practical issues related to communal civil society, which stresses their “bridging and bonding” functions.



Speaking on “Mahalla institution in post-Soviet Uzbekistan”, **Mr. Farrukh Imazarov, CADI Country Director for Uzbekistan**, put emphasis on “mahalla” as a traditional structure within Uzbek society and as neighbourhood association based around a group of elders who traditionally sought to resolve internal problems and conflicts and helped the residents in various ways. Mahalla has emerged many centuries ago, and is still an original institution of human communication, above all, respect for good neighbourly relations, respect for elders and reverence for the younger age, caring for the elderly, children, the sick and the traditional way of mutual assistance and where all involved in the mahalla participate in organization of celebrations, conducts *hashar* (collective neighbourhood environmental, greening or cleaning activities). It is a non-profit organization the objective of which is to improve social, economic and cultural level of the mahalla, the preservation and promotion of the best national traditions and customs, the regulation, coordination and development of citizens' assemblies. Thanks to this in the country consistent



measures to strengthen and develop the legal framework for the activities of citizens' self-governance, "mahalla" has become an integral part of the political, economic and spiritual life of society. Mr. Inazarov spoke about the research initiative currently underway aiming to investigate the "mahalla" phenomenon in the Central Asian region, and develop an analytical framework to understand the extent to which the government in Uzbekistan utilises "mahallas" as tools in resolving issues pertaining to the most acute problems of the region - ethnic driven clashes. This leads to two broader questions, such as: how successful are "mahallas" in resolving these issues? If "the mahalla" institution is successful, is the Uzbek case able to serve as a role-model for the neighbouring societies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in conflict mitigation?

Focusing on "Local Communities in Maintaining Peace and Security: Lessons from Central Asia", **Mr. Roman Vakulchuk, CADI Country Director for Kazakhstan**, elaborated on the transformation processes in Local Communities (LCs) and potential for security maintenance, role of the state as well as relationships between LCs and international organizations. In his view, the transformations of recent years have had profound impact on the state and performance of LCs.



The speaker emphasized the globalization and westernization of local communities which loosen traditional ties, local communities transform but increasingly depend on the state (referred to as "Soviet path-dependency") as well as increasing global desire for efficiency in community development.

In terms of LCs-international organisations nexus, the speaker mentioned four aspects: a) LCs are exposed to external influence and learning processes, which play a bigger role today than before; b) the discourse on people-centred development by IOs and state-centred by the government; c) Community level development as a process of 'empowering'; and d) The whole development process as a 'liberating' experience and not merely the imposition of externally designed programmes and projects.



Presenting on "The Role of Religious and Community Leaders in Conflict Prevention in Tajikistan", **Mr. Vatani Alidodov, a World Bank Special Program Fellow, University of Tsukuba**, sought to assess the role of community-based civil society organisations in mitigating the effects of a micro-level conflict in Khorog of Tajikistan, in 2012. According to the speaker, the main reason of conferring the region as an autonomous district was that in the region living minority ethnic groups which is speaking in its own dialects far from Tajik but belonging to ancient east Iranian languages groups of family. Moreover most of the population which is living in that region belongs to the Shia Ismailia sect of Islam which the majority of the Tajiks belong to Sunni sect. In his presentation, Mr. Alidodov, discussed the role of the so-called "Group of 20", a mediator group which succeeded to bring the conflicting parties to the negotiating table and sign a peace agreement. In his view, there is need for a more comprehensive approach toward community and religious leaders, given their historical and socio-political impact within the society.

Since the first session chaired by **Professor Shioya Akifumi, University of Tsukuba** has focused mainly on the situation in post-Soviet Central Asia, the second session has centered the attention on the experiences from the broader Asian perspective, including the case-studies of Japan, Bangladesh, Thailand followed by insights from Nepal, the Philippines, India as well as an experience from South Africa.



In her presentation on the role of neighbourhood associations in contemporary Japanese society, **Ms. Maki Kaita, a PhD Candidate, University of Tsukuba**, gave a big picture of recent trends in the public sector, local governance and community development.



In her view, although each neighbourhood association exhibits its own feature depending on the local cultural and economic conditions, some common characteristics of neighbourhood associations, known as *Jichi-kai*, include the following: a) High participation rate (63.0% traditional rural→100% participation); b) Key members are retired elderly men c) Cooperation with children clubs, senior citizens' clubs and social welfare councils; d) Conducting cleaning and beautification, residential road management and support for the elderly, rotating message board, distributing PR magazines and donation (cooperation with local government) and e) requesting activities from local government officials.



The next speaker, **Shakil Ahmed, a Post-Doctoral fellow, CAJS, University of Tsukuba**, has focused on the theme “The Ability to Penetrate at National and Communal levels: Dichotomous Approaches between NGOs and Islamic Civil Society of Bangladesh”. The speaker’s posed the key research question: Why Islamic civil society in Bangladesh grows well at the community level without the support of foreign aid in comparison to NGOs?



In making his case, the speaker has made two major arguments: First, the foreign aid dependency of NGOs has limited the scope of membership basis which in fact impedes the community relation with NGOs. NGOs can influence better at national level than local areas. Second, Islamic civil society is well grounded at the community level in Bangladesh with solid membership based on contribution and participation.

### Percentage of Households Giving to Organizations in Bangladesh

	Envio. & Sports, Others	Others culture, arts, clubs, children & youth	Edu. & research	Health	Social services, relief	Religious institution & charities	Business, Profession, trade union, employ. Assn.	Political org.	Cooperative
Metro	0.01	18.3	42.5	2.1	10.7	89.7	4.1	0.1	0.8
Urban	0.01	11.1	29.7	2.9	16.1	81.2	2.5	0.07	0.6
Rural	-	15.1	15.2	1.2	4.3	70.5	-	0.01	15.4

Source: Ahmad 2007

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Dr. Ahmed has concluded by suggesting that a) mosque retains its position in the Bangladeshi society as an indigenous institution; b) NGOs are dominant civil society organisations; c) yet NGOs as civil society are “leaders without followers” unlike other traditional/religious organisations; d) Mosque is people-based - rather alien actor in the domain of State; e) Strong bureaucracy and weak local government - mosque is filling power vacuum; f) State and society remain divided - unutilized social capital.

The second session’s last speaker, **Mr. Kongjit Chalermpon, Research fellow, CAJS and Lecturer, Chiang Mai University in Thailand**, has made his presentation on “Enhancing Urban Community Self-management in Thailand’s Upper Northern Region 1”.



The speaker has put emphasis on the prospects for enhancing the role of a community in urban setting. He presented his case, closely relating it to pre-1997 government-supported initiatives to strengthen the activities of urban communal organisations.

The latter was referred to as a local group of residents living together in particular geographic area, in the same block or zone, (crowded community), in the municipality area of Thailand. In his presentation, the speaker has elaborated on the community approach to governance and public participation.

His presentation has made a five-fold differentiation/classification of public participation, which included: a) Inform; to provide the knowledge and information; b) Consult; to share residents’ opinion; c) Involve; to work directly with the public; d) Collaborate; to be partner with public and have high cooperate in the activities; e) Empower; to place final decision-making and hold the public.

Survey’s Finding	Before 1997	After 1997
Relation with local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Social</li> <li>- Unit of resident (government support group - urban poor resident group)</li> <li>•Political</li> <li>-Canvasser (patron-client system)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Social</li> <li>- Cooperate group</li> <li>- Unit of resident (self-reliance, self-help)</li> <li>- Network group of resident</li> <li>- Government officers as a coordinator and/or advisor</li> <li>•Political</li> <li>- Seem to be canvasser (Kinship system)</li> <li>- Messenger</li> </ul>

The speakers presentation has inspired a lively discussion among Japanese and international participants of the seminar.



Prof. Nathan Quimpo (SPCA, University of Tsukuba)



Prof. Jeet Sapkota (University of Tsukuba)



Dr. Swasti Rao (CAJS, University of Tsukuba)



Ms. Hlamulo Makelane (HSRC, South Africa)

For more information about the organisers of the international round-table seminar, please refer to:

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ADVANCED JAPANESE STUDIES (CAJS),  
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<http://www.cajs.tsukuba.ac.jp/en/information/>

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<http://cadinetwork.org/index.php/en/>

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<http://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/foundation>