

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND INCLUSIVE RECOVERY AFTER THE KUMAMOTO EARTHQUAKES

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Abstract

Disasters change the societies in which they occur and lead us to question norms which might otherwise be taken for granted. Beyond the physical damage inflicted upon infrastructure and injuries to human bodies, the social impacts of stress and conflict are sometimes the most severe, and often hidden, results and causes for prolonged existential suffering. The focus of examining the Kumamoto Earthquakes is to look at an example of how social exclusion formulated following a disaster in contemporary Japanese society, and also to examine the actors that provided aid and integration for marginalized people. This example aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how conflicts within and between communities can formulate in different cultural and social settings and explore ways of addressing a multitude of social problems that can occur in the aftermath of disasters and adverse situations.

Background and Context

On April 14 and 16 2016, two earthquakes with a magnitude of 7, and thousands of smaller tremors ranging from 1-6 over the following weeks (during this time, the ground literally did not stop shaking), struck Kumamoto Japan. This resulted in hundreds of thousands of residents of Kumamoto city and several of its outlying villages needing to stay in temporary shelters, usually in school gymnasiums and other public buildings. While these shelters were officially accessible to all residents, certain people faced discrimination or were made to feel uncomfortable and resorted to living in cars or unsafe places, in some cases for several months. Those who were not registered as staying in official shelters were often not able to access food, toilets and other aid eventually provided by the local and national governments. Also due to highways, train lines and the airport being severely damaged, food and other supplies became extremely scarce across the prefecture. Many areas were without water, gas and electricity for weeks or months.

Of the people who frequently were excluded in shelters, residents with physical or mental disabilities and those caring for disabled family members faced severe discrimination. Foreigners, single mothers and low-income families were also frequently excluded leading to social conflicts in many communities. As of April 2017, one year after the disaster, 47,168 people were still living in official temporary housing (government provided trailers) (Sakuma, 2017). While five years on the number of

residents in temporary housing was down to 64 households and 184 individuals (*Kumamoto Prefecture, 2021*), the people who remained in temporary housing years after the disaster were generally those who had limited mobility, especially elderly and disabled residents.

In the case of contemporary Japan, the suspension of normalcy and routine in everyday life caused major disruptions in the relationships between members of communities. This condition of existential crisis due to uncertainty and the ensuing social changes have played out in a particularly unique way in the context of the Kumamoto earthquakes, not only in the immediate aftermath but also in the years following the disaster.

Point of Observation

I had come to live in Kumamoto shortly before the earthquakes, after being offered a job at a local university. While I had only recently moved to Japan and was somewhat isolated as an outsider in this rural part of the country, I was fortunate to have made friendships early on with several community members who would become key in using informal networks to respond to local needs. Shortly after the disaster I also moved into a community share-house, *Nagaya*, which was organized by a local artist who would later become a community leader involved in the response and recovery process. Over the following two-years that I resided in *Nagaya*, the house became a centre in Kumamoto for outsiders, marginalized community members and those involved in recovery activities on an unofficial level. The accounts in this paper are based on my observations through participation with local social networks and stories collected from community members that I came to know during this period.

My own dual experiences as a foreigner, but also a lecturer at the local university, situated my observations from a unique social position. In some cases the fact that I was viewed as an outsider gave me access to certain situations while in others it was limiting. My official position within the society also provided me with a certain degree of (undeserved) social privilege and access to people who otherwise would have likely ignored me, at the same time my position as a researcher could in some circumstances have resulted in distrust from marginalized residents who had become wary of official institutions.

Social Roles and Hierarchies

People tend to imagine themselves as part of a community through socially constructed notions of identity which are dependent on the exclusion of 'others' who are not part of the community (Anderson, 2006). In situations of extreme stress and institutional fragility social fragmentation can result in the stigmatization of individuals deemed to be outside of the community. Language used to identify people as belonging to a specific group and the exclusion or non-recognition of those who do not constitutes what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence (1989, 1991). Non-recognition allows for the

legitimation of social exclusion as it normalizes the non-belongingness of the outsider. While language and narrative are often defining tools in driving and contributing to social fragmentation during adverse situation, they can also be used to recreate or solidify cohesion in communities divided by conflict (Rickard, 2014).

Politicized language is used in many nations classify non-citizens into categories of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' foreigners, often referring to undocumented or illegal immigrants, or simply those who do not belong (Suzuki 2019). Japan during the late 1980s revised its policies on immigration to allow for the importation of foreign labour while also maintaining political rhetoric of a homogeneous society. As the number of foreign residents in Japan has grown steadily, and is projected to grow exponentially in the coming decades, both media and legal policies have frequently portrayed foreigners as dangerous and causing crime (ibid). Government and media campaigns to increase tourism since the 2000s, coinciding with contradictory policies to combat 'foreign crimes,' have contributed to the imagined dichotomy of 'desirable' and 'undesirable' types of foreigners and the systematic social exclusion of the latter.

Social formations in contemporary Japan have contributed to what has been described as a 'conformist society' (Hendry, 2019). This is to emphasize that people are expected to behave in a predictable way, institutions are built on the notion of predictability and children are taught not to disrupt the harmony of the larger community from a young age. Japanese society has undergone major social changes since the post war reconstruction, to some degree the perception of 'conformity' in contemporary Japan can be viewed as the result of the failure of major labour movements during the 1960s and 70s, and the government's response to popular calls for radical change by student groups during the same period (Garon, 1998). Subsequent reforms and control over education and media have resulted in an increasingly strict imagination of how one should exist as a member of society.

Japanese concepts of privacy are unique and need to be given context to understand how social conflicts can develop in crisis situations. Distinctions between in-groups or that within the home *uchi*, and out-groups *soto* or outside are necessary for understanding how to interact with others. Separations between public and private behaviour are also important in forming appropriate ways to perform in society, one's true or private-self, *honne*, as oppose to, *tatemae*, public-self or 'masked' and behaviour which is expected by society. While this may be viewed as hypocritical or dishonest from a non-Japanese perspective, a strict separation between that which is private and what one presents to the outside world is necessary for maintaining social harmony in Japanese culture (Hendry, 2019). Failure to fall into expected roles, such as obtaining a 'respectable' job in a company or as a civil servant, or forming a nuclear family, may also be viewed as sources of shame, particularly in conservative areas.

While strict orders of hierarchy and social rules are commonly understood as part of the Japanese worldview, social exclusion and alienation that may characterise some of the more ridged elements of Japanese society are not necessarily phenomena rooted in traditional culture. Tsing (2016) describes the extreme social changes in Japanese society that accompanied mass urban migration following recovery from World War

II into the economic bubble of the 1970s and 80s, the detachment from community and sense of anomie that are associated as some of the more negative aspects of contemporary Japan are in fact more closely aligned with more recent changes and expectations in society. “The economy of spectacles and desires flourished, but it became detached from life-course expectations. It became hard to imagine where life should lead and what, besides commodities, should be in it” (ibid; 263).

These notions may to some extent explain how in the case of Kumamoto some individuals and families viewed as different were marginalized and rejected. Japanese media and education have increasingly emphasized a shared identity (or mythology) of Japan as a homogeneous society. The rise in xenophobia and nationalistic views present in political rhetoric coincides with a rapidly aging society and a low birth rate, contributing to common feeling of impending crisis. Despite more recent discussions of diversity and multiculturalism as positive advances, these ignore that there have long existed many people with diverse ethnic heritage and mixed backgrounds in Japan, although their lives have largely been hidden from public view (Shimoji & Ogaya, 2019).

In shelters, where entire communities of hundreds of people would need to share a common space for an indefinite amount of time, the harmony and predictability that usually facilitated social interactions is suspended, and matters which would normally be considered as private were exposed. The embarrassment of showing inner-household matters including marriage problems, loud children and disabled family members. The exposure to one’s neighbours and community was cause for existential stress for many people and for some, a source of shame. Many adults also faced temporary or long-term unemployment due to the earthquake, which was not only a financial hardship but an embarrassment for themselves and their families. As a result, in some cases men who had lost their jobs would stay away from shelters leaving their families behind to create the impression that they had work. Such instances also caused stress within the families of victims, and social deterioration in the community.

In the case of minority or marginalized residents, the experience of an unwelcoming and socially uncomfortable atmosphere was a common cause of feelings of exclusion from official shelters and aid.¹ Elderly staying in shelters in some cases discouraged those with young children who might cause noise and disturbances. Single mothers were an especially vulnerable group as they faced multiple levels of discrimination within the community and were often viewed as shameful, particularly those who were not Japanese (Sakuma, 2017).² Those who could not register in government shelters,

1 The concept of *kuuki* 空気, literally air, refers to the social atmosphere and the unspoken meanings should be interpreted by others.

2 In Kumamoto immigrant single mothers faced particularly severe problems such as discrimination and administrative access to aid, research by the legal organization Kumastaka published in the report by Sakuma 2017 focuses on their situations specifically.

such as those without identification documents or address as well as minorities,³ were often denied access to through official means.⁴

Perceptions of Disaster and Social Change

Much work on disaster recovery has focused on infrastructure and administrative responses, however resilience after disasters is often rooted in the ability of the community to respond not only to physical but also social needs in order to restore the well-being of residents. In cases of disaster recovery in Japan, advanced infrastructure and technology along with a strong centralized government response are often credited with the society moving past catastrophes. However, overwhelming evidence has indicated that community and civil society have played a much greater role in both immediate and long-term recovery than administrative responses, and that more serious social problems or an inability to recover have occurred where local networks have been lacking (Aldrich 2012, 2013, 2016).

Aldrich (2012) notes that following the 1923 Kanto Earthquake which destroyed 40 percent of Tokyo and the surrounding areas, communities with higher levels of social cooperation were able to recover quickly, while residents with fewer connections in their communities were at greater risk for being unable to understand procedures for accessing aid and more likely to engage in illegal activities. Neighbourhoods of Tokyo and Yokohama which had higher numbers of rallies and political demonstrations also showed more resilience in terms of coordination between residents and their eventual return following the disaster (ibid). In contemporary Japan, where voicing dissident political views is discouraged and political participation as well as civil society activism is viewed with suspicion, social workers and those who become informally active in providing aid or advocacy are often themselves marginalized (Pharr, 2003).

Contrary to mobilizing community for social recovery and inclusion disasters have often resulted fear and hysteria. Following the Kanto Earthquake in 1923, thousands of *Zainichi* Koreans living in the Tokyo-Yokohama area were violently massacred following rumours of vandalism and destruction. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, rumours of foreigners looting and rioting spread fear and distrust among residents displaced by the disasters. While rumours generating

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- 3 Most of the foreigners who were difficult to locate or assess their situations were workers on the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP visas). Mostly from Vietnam, China and the Philippines. Because they are very restricted by their visas and employers they are often hidden in isolated areas, in factories and farms, and it was difficult to get information about their situations because many local residents do not actually know that they exists.
 - 4 One organization in Kumamoto city, Kumamoto International Foundation (KIF), opened their facilities to operate as a shelter specifically for foreigners. This was very helpful especially for international students, researchers and other migrants and minorities living in the city. Unfortunately there was difficulty in spreading information widely, and the TITP workers who are the most marginalized group, were very difficult to locate as their movement and communication was restricted by their employers or brokers.

fear and violence did not significantly occur following the Kumamoto earthquakes, with the exception of falsely spread stories of a lion escaping from the local zoo (*Japan Times* 2017), anxiety from the disaster and uncertainty in the evacuation shelters did create tensions between and in some cases exclusion of certain residents.

There is a history of social fragmentation and the exclusion of marginalized community members following disasters in Japan. In the years following the disasters of March 11, 2011 discrimination of evacuees from the affected region of Fukushima has become a largely ignored social problem, as many people who tried to resettle in other parts of Japan have at times been perceived as ‘dirty’ from radioactive contamination or as taking advantage of social welfare regardless of if they were actually receiving compensation or not. Schisms within communities of evacuees also developed as different policies were applied to ‘forced evacuees’ who were ordered to leave the restricted area, and ‘voluntary evacuees’ who chose to leave areas they feared maybe contaminated (Harada, 2019). Similarly social exclusion following widespread methylmercury poisoning in the town Minamata in southern Kumamoto Prefecture during the mid-twentieth century. Harsh discrimination of victims and their families over the effects of industrial pollution and those who received compensation/recognition, and those who did not, caused deep divisions and social fragmentation in Minamata that remain today.

Solidarity Networks for Social Inclusion

In Kumamoto city a majority of the population stayed in shelters for safety, although many marginalized residents chose to stay, in often unsafe, homes or other places. While official shelters are to be provided with basic needs such as food, water and toilet facilities, the delivery of supplies to Kumamoto was limited due to the destruction of connecting highways and the local airport. The delivery of supplies to shelters was also complicated by a lack of preparedness of the local government in terms of facilitating who would be in charge of such tasks and how they should be implemented. As a result many shelters housing hundreds or thousands of residents often were without food and supplies for days. In some cases groups of young people, in their twenties and thirties, set up soup kitchens outside of shelters and other places where people were staying using camping equipment. While the hot meals were usually appreciated by the hungry and depressed residents staying in the shelters, there was occasionally suspicion as to why people would cook for free, especially when foreigners were involved in the volunteer groups. In some instances the local management of certain shelters rejected non-government food aid provided by volunteers, even at times when no food had been delivered to the residents, and on some occasions called the police to question and threaten the participants.

Volunteer groups had no formal structure or official authority in the community, they spontaneously formed in response to the need in their communities. The participants in volunteer activities themselves came from a range of backgrounds and were often unemployed or part-time workers, although several of them were social workers but participating in a non-official capacity. As they did not fall into standardized social roles of authority, their mobilization relied on their pre-existing

social networks within the community. Many were individuals who had been involved in social support and advocacy of minorities and socially disadvantaged residents, and themselves lived on the margins of society as their own occupations or lifestyles were outside of what is considered as socially acceptable. While some individuals became leaders of volunteer groups in certain areas, there was no formalized hierarchy and decisions were usually made based on negotiation between community members. This is in stark contrast to the top-down structure of Japanese politics as well as to the administrative access to official aid such as shelters where the decisions required approval through channels civil servants.

Axt has examined how certain groups of foreigners in Kumamoto were able to exercise agency in initiating relief activities following the earthquakes through informal social networks (2020). While many foreign residents were expectedly marginalized in the aftermath of the disaster, in some cases it was precisely through informal and unofficial networks, which many foreigners in Japan by necessity must make, that they were capable of making significant contributions to the society when it was needed most.

Marlo came to live in Japan in 2002, originally from Indonesia he attended university in Australia where he met his wife and later moved to her hometown, Kumamoto. At the time the population of foreigners, and particularly Muslims, living in the area was quite small and scattered. During the early 2000's more international students and researchers would come to study at local universities and the number of foreigners working in industry in Kumamoto gradually increased. Marlo and other Muslims founded Kumamoto Islamic Center (KIC) as a social group to pray together and in 2012 acquired a building to use as a Masjid next to Kumamoto University. Over the years the Muslim population in Kumamoto grew from around 40 to 200 with many coming from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia. Although KIC offered support and a formal gathering place, the community remained isolated as most members did not speak Japanese and local knowledge of Islam was limited, many of the neighbours were suspicious and fearful, particularly as images of IS (Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL) were widespread in Japanese media leading to misperceptions of Muslims. Following the earthquakes in 2016 KIC received large donations of food, sanitary items and money from the Muslim community throughout Japan which was delivered directly and without delay or complications as they had completely independent and unofficial networks. KIC used the Masjid as a shelter for their members as well as a storage facility for what became an excess surplus of food and supplies. Wanting to reach out to the local community Marlo began to contact shelters which he knew were short on supplies but was turned down out of fear. After working with some local Japanese volunteers through Kumamoto International Foundation (KIF) to help as intermediaries several shelters as well as encampments of people living in their cars accepted donations from KIC members. This was the first time as Marlo recalls that KIC had established friendly communication and improved reputation with the local community. For Marlo, the earthquakes changed the dynamics for the Muslim community in Kumamoto from an isolated group of foreigners having little connection to the local Japanese residents to a positive presence in the society. He now is often asked to speak on behalf of the Muslim community and provide outreach about the issues facing marginalized foreign workers.

Social Conflict and Inclusion in a Rural Setting

Nishihara Village is a small community near the volcano Mt. Aso and close to the epicentre of the earthquake. As a rural and mountainous area, Nishihara faced considerable destruction following the earthquakes such as dramatic geographic land shifts and bridges collapsing, as well as becoming severely isolated to the extent that some areas, such as Ōgiri-hata, were only accessible by helicopter. Most residents relocated to the community shelter in the gymnasium of the village elementary school. Although many residents with social disabilities, and those who did not want to live in the exposure of the shelter chose to stay living in cars or outdoors.

Sansho was a 30 year-old *rakugo* artist but without regular employment, who grew up in the Nishihara. Living in Kumamoto city at the time, Sansho immediately returned to Nishihara following the earthquakes, bringing with him tents and camping equipment. Through a loose network of friends, local farmers and other young people without regular employment, Sansho negotiated to use several fields of farmland as Base Camps, areas where displaced families could live in their cars or tents together as a community. Ongoing tremors and heavy rains followed throughout the weeks after the initial earthquakes causing landslides and other hazards which required extra protection for those living outdoors.

As store shelves quickly emptied and supplies ran out throughout the affected areas, residents in shelters waited for government provided rice and food. In rural areas such as Nishihara deliveries of supplies took considerably more time to arrive than in Kumamoto city. In the week following the earthquake, Yoshinoya a chain for *gyūdon* (a common fast-food of meat on rice), sent trucks to deliver prepared food to shelters which was among the first hot meals to reach the village (SoraNews24, 2016). As the trucks delivered food to the official shelter, residents living in the camps approached but were turned away as they were not officially registered as staying in the shelter. This led to deeper schisms in the community adding to the resentment felt by many due to discrimination and exclusion. As conflicts in the community continued to become more severe and the situations of those in the camps more desperate, Sansho was able to facilitate the delivery of food first through members of his personal network sharing supplies and then through negotiating donations from businesses around Japan. In time he was also able to acquire portable toilets and sanitation facilities as donations for the thousands of residents who were living in the camps.

Becoming an important community leader and relied on in the months and years after the disaster, Sansho and the group of local volunteers he recruited, eventually formed a loosely-structured organization for continuing rebuilding and recovery projects, although he remained officially unemployed and continued living in the camp among displaced residents. Sansho remained living in Nishihara after Base Camp had finally been taken down, and continued to be known as a local leader and volunteer. Years after the disaster he continued to be called on by marginalized residents, particularly the disabled and those who would be placed in temporary housing. Despite

his role as a community volunteer supporting many people his work would not be recognized by the municipality in an official capacity.⁵

The projects that he has facilitated in the years since earthquake have included rebuilding of damaged homes and businesses as well as the restoration of a local Shinto shrine. He has also coordinated flower planting projects throughout Nishihara, as well as community festivals and social events. He would later establish a drive-in theatre in the village, building a huge screen in a field overlooking Kumamoto city. Eventually his drive-in theatre events became well-known throughout Kyushu after he created events in other communities which had been damaged by heavy rain and flooding in 2020, with more communities responding positively to such activities following the COVID-19 pandemic. While Sansho's projects seemed to shift in nature, from providing immediate logistical disaster relief for marginalized victims to recreational activities, they aimed to include all members of the community and were instrumental in repairing divisions. His various activities targeted both less-visible and vulnerable residents such as disabled people and children suffering from trauma related to the earthquakes, to provide psychological relief as well as social inclusion for those who had been marginalized.

While some people remained living in shelters and cars for up to six months after the earthquakes, most of the displaced residents in Nishihara were eventually moved to temporary housing units which were situated in agricultural fields. Hundreds of metal trailers were erected in rows to house the thousands of displaced residents, in the fashion of a military camp, where families who had lost their homes could apply to stay for a limited time. The local municipality is in charge of managing the temporary houses and determines who is eligible to stay in them based on the level of damage to residents' homes. The government encourages residents to move out from the temporary housing units as quickly as possible and sets deadlines for demolishing them. The temporary housing 'village' is situated in a remote 'hidden' area and the small trailers are crowded closely together, making them inconvenient and uncomfortable places to live. Most residents successfully moved from the from the temporary houses within a year of moving there. As residents moved away, units were demolished and the 'village' shrank. Four years after the earthquakes, there are still a few hundred people remaining in the temporary houses, those without the ability to leave (Nippon, 2018).

Mikiko was one of such victims, her home was classified as 'half destroyed' by the government to determine the amount of compensation she was entitled to, but was completely unliveable. In her mid-sixties Mikiko lives with her mother who is in her eighties. Both women suffer from severe physical disabilities and are extremely limited in their mobility. Following the earthquakes they felt unaccommodated for and rejected in the official shelter so stayed living in her car with her mother and cat for months. After eventually moving into the temporary housing she found that she was unable to open

5 An official community care-taker, or *minsei tin* 民生委員, would normally undergo a process of appointment by local officials such as a mayor. This role would be recognized in an official capacity and normally be given to someone of high social status such as a teacher or police officer.

the door to the tiny unit allotted for her and her mother due to her limited movement. Sansho and his volunteers built ramps and railings in her housing unit and around the temporary housing area, but no such provisions were made by the municipality. As residents moved away and housing units were removed, Mikiko and her mother were forced to move from one tiny unit to another, a difficult and stressful tasks considering their disabilities, but aged and unable to work, they had few options. While Mikiko is severely limited, she painstakingly researches her legal rights and public policy and raises awareness of the situations of people unable to move on after hardships, and those who are socially and politically marginalized. Her work has made her a leader and organizer, but had not made her popular in the community. While she has successfully improved the conditions of people living in the temporary housing and especially those suffering from disabilities, many have accused her of being troublesome and in many ways her work to improve the situations of herself and others has made her more isolated. In the context Nishihara and the temporary housing she is a known voice of resistance to a government that wishes to disappear anyone raising inconvenient concerns, but she is also punished for raising her voice.

For Mikiko, the Japanese society that she sees on television, or even the nearby town Ozu where she is brought just 20 minutes by car for medical appointments, are totally different worlds, drastically contrasting from the uncertainty and unsettledness of her daily life. This psychological state speaks to the continued hidden suffering that those who are silenced by society are forced to live with. As time passed her physical condition has further deteriorated, three years after moving into the temporary housing she cannot stand or walk without the use of a walking frame. She feels tired from having to constantly explain her situation and the social situations of the community to bureaucrats, in Japan civil servants are frequently rotating in their positions and local information is often not shared between them, thus she finds herself needing to constantly repeat herself. This causes her frustration as it is a reminder that things are unlikely to change for future generations. Mikiko emphasises the disfunction of strict bureaucracy and conservative society which favours *kenjōsha* 健常者,⁶ able-bodied persons, as she and other people with disabilities are constantly made to feel unwelcome and as if they are a burden. She emphasises that those who exists in the society who cannot be the ‘same’ as others are expected to remain conveniently silent in ‘equal suffering’ and that people who raise their voices are punished. While she suffers she does not do so in silence, and is an outspoken voice for those who cannot speak out.

Civil Society and Social Reconstruction in Uncertainty

These brief examples aim to illustrate the hidden social problems which can be exposed in times of crisis, as well as impressive and innovative ways in which people who might otherwise be considered as ‘social outcasts’ use and develop grassroots networks in order to accommodate and create *alternative-communities*

6 *Kenjōsha* 健常者 is used as an antonym of ‘disabled person’.

for the inclusion of marginalized people. Japan is an advanced capitalist nation with highly developed infrastructure for disaster prevention, nevertheless the social needs of people are often not addressed. Growing socioeconomic inequality through rapid development and neoliberal reforms have resulted in a divided civil society and the denial of social citizenship to certain individuals (Saitō, 2006). Perceived differences between groups (male/ female, youth/ elder, regular/ irregular workers, disabled/ non-disabled) are accelerated through lack of contact between people in other categories leading to increasing distrust and antagonism between them. Rapid social changes and uncertainty make individual's social positions unstable and produces constant anxiety and anomie as well as a detachment toward others which contribute to *bundan shakai*, the divided society (Shiobara 2019). The social conditions which generate stress and anxiety can be amplified in adverse circumstances, and can be driving forces in existential crisis and suicide.

The experiences described above show ways that individuals negotiate life and get by in precarious situations when they do not fit in, or are excluded from, the ridged and uniformed bureaucratic systems that make up contemporary Japanese society. They also point to further overlooked structural violence present in Japan which normalizes the punishment of nonconformity and allows for minorities and other vulnerable people to easily 'fall out of society.' Close ties and cooperation between banks, large corporations, and local and national levels of government maintain the rigid top-down power structure that tightly controls almost every aspect of Japanese economic and administrative life (Pharr, 2003). Media and education follow and reinforce this model closely resulting in the expectation that the system and government will take care of society without active public engagement. As a result political participation, community activism or deviating from a certain set of expectations is highly discouraged and frowned upon. Following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and following nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, public frustration with lack of transparency and refusal to take responsibility closed a certain distance between politics and the public. Informal social movements have increasingly taken on roles in sustaining communities and have often been transformed into permanent organizations with fixed duties in society. Even as NGOs and informal groups play more vital roles in providing public services, especially for marginalized communities in Japan, civil society is excluded in politics and decision making to an extent far greater than other developed democracies (Aldrich 2013).

Developing resilience through community cohesion is vital for recovery, especially in situations where official institutions are overwhelmed following disasters. By understanding the social problems that have occurred such as in the uncertainty of post-earthquake Kumamoto as well as the civil society response that has led to wider social changes in several communities, this aims to give insights into resilience building in contemporary Japan. Attention is needed in addressing social conflicts and the needs of vulnerable populations following disasters. By understanding the social challenges faced by certain communities we can better address vulnerabilities and move beyond disaster response towards community recovery and social inclusion.

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