

Chapter 8

Putting SDGs into Practice through the Participation of Citizens and the Role of Local Governments

Introduction

In recent years, government services have become increasingly limited due to declining tax revenues and shrinking budgets, while the falling number of children and demographic aging have exacerbated issues such as welfare. As such, we can expect more and more people to fall through the various social safety nets in the future. When this happens, it will be at the level of the local community that those at risk of being left behind are most likely to be noticed. In order to sustain local communities, and to realize a society where no one is left behind at the local level, it is essential to broaden and diversify the people who contribute to civic life.

In this chapter, we would like to address the topic of citizen and resident participation. Calls for “resident-centered community development” can be heard in many municipalities, and Kesennuma City is promoting resident participation under the slogan of “citizen-led community development.” Taking the “Shishiori Community Building Council,” with whom the author has been involved, as an example, this chapter will review how the council’s activities have changed over time. It will also explore the process of expanding and enhancing resident participation and examine the ideal relationship between residents and the government.

1 Putting SDGs into Practice with Resident Participation: Activities of the Shishiori Community Building Council

The Shishiori Community Building Council (hereafter referred to as the “Community Council”) is a residents’

group in the Shishiori District of Kesennuma City. The author was active in the secretariat of this group for three years before working at the city office. As of October 2021, the district had a population of about 5,000 people (out of the approximately 60,400 for the city as a whole). It currently has 27 administrative precincts and also constitutes an elementary school district. It suffered severe damage from the Great East Japan Earthquake and was featured frequently on national news because of events such as a major fire at sea and a large fishing boat swept inland by the tsunami (Figure 8-1).

From its establishment to the present, the Community Council has gone through the following three phases (p. 104, Table 8-1).

Figure 8-1: Southern part of Shishiori District



Source: Drawn on map from the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan

(1) Founding Phase: October 2012–March 2014

The Shishiori Community Building Council was established in October 2012, after the disaster, in order to involve residents in the recovery planning process. It was made up of the heads of the neighborhood associations for the 13 wards that had been affected by the disaster (out

of the district's 27 wards), and the scope of its activities was limited to those areas. The Community Council's most important activities during this period were to discuss the vision for the reconstruction of Shishiori and community development at residents' meetings and in workshops with junior high school students, and to draw up recommendations regarding the "Grand Design" for the reconstruction of the district, which were submitted to the Mayor of Kesennuma in March 2014.

Outside experts were heavily involved in this phase, and with the help of university students, the views expressed by residents at workshops and similar events were compiled into a proposal. However, the people affected by the disaster were still too busy rebuilding their lives to participate actively, and most of the neighborhood association heads (who were the main players in the Community Council) felt unable to be forthright with their opinions, given that most of them had suffered relatively little damage to their property. There was a disconnect between the sentiments of residents who had been affected by the disaster and those who had not, and while this largely dissipated as the recovery progressed, there are still some aspects in which it persists. The governance of local communities was also in a chaotic state in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Given this situation, there was limited participation from residents, and it was difficult to say that any relationship with the government had been established.

(2) Recovery Phase: April 2014–March 2017

The Community Council's board members felt a growing sense of urgency about the lack of resident participation.

The turning point came with the arrival of several capable individuals at the behest of an advisory city council member, which was followed by organizational reforms. All neighborhood association heads were asked to nominate two or three young people or women per ward, and a "constituent meeting" was organized (March 2015). Since then, they have continued to meet every week without fail, acting as the Community Council's driving force and front-line personnel (Figure 8-2). Activities during this period were varied, but mainly centered around discussions about recovery work. Various proposals and requests were submitted to the Mayor on five occasions during this period, including the "Vision for the Future of Shishiori" (March 2016), a proposal on the district's vital-

ity, livelihoods, and disaster prevention measures, which the constituent members had spent months discussing.

Figure 8-2: Constituent meeting



Cooperation with the government made progress, and some city officials joined as constituent members. In addition, staff from the relevant city departments began to participate in constituent meetings whenever they had something they wanted to discuss with the residents. Daily communication with city officials proved very effective in fostering collaboration between the government and residents.

In addition, residents' opinions also started to be reflected in some of the reconstruction projects. The Community Council held workshops for junior high school students and residents on the design of a new park and the selection of trees to be planted along roads, and residents' views were incorporated into the results. The most difficult activity at the time was to build consensus among residents on a plan for a pedestrianized street, which divided opinion and led to a petition campaign. Through meetings with residents to exchange views, and behind-the-scenes negotiations among the Council's board members, the voices of residents were successfully conveyed to the authorities. In addition, private homes and extensive public housing for disaster victims were constructed on an area of newly raised ground, and preparations were made to receive residents returning to the district, facilitating community interaction.

The most significant activity during this period was the Shishiori Recovery Bon Dance Festival, which took place on August 11, 2016. The purpose of the festival was to bring residents, who had lost touch with each other for

some time, back together at the site of the disaster after a five-year absence. Led by the Shishiori Community Building Council, more than 20 organizations in the district made preparations for the event. Elementary and junior high school students drew the posters, and the festival brought the community together. The centerpiece was the “great tug-of-war,” an event that had been held at the district festival before the disaster (Figure 8-3). The large rope that had traditionally been used had been swept away by the tsunami but was later miraculously recovered. It was the first festival the district had seen for some time and served as a link to its memories from before the disaster. The Bon Dance Festival was held every year after that, until it was again suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

❖ Figure 8-3: Great tug-of-war



(3) Development Phase: April 2017–Present

Over time, the focus of the Community Council’s activities has gradually shifted from recovery to local issues. These diverse issues include the erection of a tsunami memorial stone, workshops to discuss disaster prevention, a public consultation on naming bridges, classes on “how to communicate with your dog,” lectures on community development at junior high schools and nursing homes, the preservation of old cherry trees, and a survey on the damage caused by Typhoon Hagibis in 2019. Kesenuma City’s “City Government Roundtable Meetings” came into play during this phase. These meetings are held once a year in each district and serve as a forum for dialogue between the Mayor, relevant government departments, and district residents. The Shishiori Community Council submitted its own proposals at the beginning of the re-

construction, but after becoming a member of the District Promotion Association (see below), it began submitting questions and requests through this association and discussing them at the City Government Roundtable Meetings. It has also been active in other community participation opportunities provided by the city, such as the Reconstruction Memorial Park Study Committee and workshops on the development of the city’s Comprehensive Plan.

In 2019, a Record-Keeping Subcommittee was formed to work on the creation of a documentary journal, together with a Disaster Prevention Subcommittee. The latter is working with the city to establish evacuation centers designed with COVID-19 measures in mind and is conducting training on setting up these centers in cooperation with the city. It is also conducting training with junior high schools on setting up and operating these centers and holding evacuation drills. During the heavy rains of July 2021, the Community Council cooperated with the city on opening and operating evacuation shelters.

In addition, new neighborhood associations had to be established and rebuilt in disaster-hit areas where residents have returned. The Community Council is cooperating with the local government to support this process. Members of the Community Council, who are local residents, informally lay the groundwork with key people in the community who could serve as neighborhood association presidents and officers, while to reassure the community, invitations to formal discussions are made in the name of the city government. Another activity typical of this phase is watching over children traveling to and from school, in cooperation with other organizations. This activity is a further embodiment of the “all-Shishiori” approach.

During this phase, a community center was provided by the city to serve as an office, and through the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC)’s Community Support Staff Program, the city also assigned one person to serve as administrative staff for the Community Council and subsidized its activity budget. Previously, the administrative staff had been hired through a prefectural grant and an office had been rented at a local assembly hall.

Table 8-1: Shishiori Community Building Council timeline

Period	Features
October 2012– March 2014 [Founding Phase]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Shishiori Community Building Council established. Situation still chaotic, including the surrounding environment. ■ Limited participation of residents. Heavy reliance on outside advisors. ■ Target area: 13 affected wards of Shishiori ■ Community Building Workshops, Youth Group, Business Group, Recommendations for the “Grand Design” ■ Relationship with government: Submission of recommendations (once)
April 2014– March 2017 [Recovery Phase]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Launch of constituent meetings: Increased independent involvement of residents. Active as front-line personnel. ■ Target: All 27 wards of Shishiori ■ Reconstruction projects (expressing opinions on parks and public facilities), support for disaster victims, Recovery Bon Dance Festival ■ Relationship with government: Submission of proposals (5 times), collaboration in workshops, etc., regular meetings between the city, the Urban Renaissance Agency, and the Community Council, and attendance of City Hall staff at constituent meetings
April 2017– Present [Development Phase]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Continuation of constituent meetings: resident-led activities. ■ Target: All 27 wards of Shishiori ■ Recovery Bon Dance Festival, disaster prevention activities such as survey of the damage and management of evacuation centers, support for establishing neighborhood associations, etc. ■ Became a member of the District Promotion Association and currently cooperates with other organizations. ■ Relationship with government: discussions at City Government Roundtable Meetings. Attendance of city officials at constituent meetings. ■ Administrative staff: support staff assigned by the city.

2 Promoting Resident Participation

This section will use the experience of the Shishiori Community Building Council to discuss key points on how to promote resident participation to realize the aim of the SDGs: a society where “no one is left behind.”

(1) Integration of Organizations with Local Communities

While increasing resident participation makes it easier to identify residents’ needs, it is extremely difficult to reach out to all residents. Furthermore, the government may call for consensus among residents, but that is next to impossible. To eliminate imbalances as much as possible, broaden the base of resident participation, and ensure that support and activities reach everyone, organizations that promote resident participation need to have roots in their communities. During the Founding Phase, outside experts had a significant presence, and during the Recovery Phase, activities expanded as reconstruction projects progressed. As a result, the residents could not always keep up, and there was little participation from them or the community association heads. Looking back, I don’t think we were fully rooted in the community. This is not uncommon — the more active a person or group is, the more likely they are to lose touch with their community. When this happens, the group becomes concerned with just a handful of residents, and the needs they can address

represent just a small fraction of the whole. As such, the question of how to spread the work of a few active people and organizations throughout the community, and how to minimize imbalances in the opinions and voices that are heard, is a critical one.

The power of festivals: The first opportunity for the Community Council to step up its efforts was the Shishiori Recovery Bon Dance Festival. The leaders of the Community Council who were pressing to hold the festival perhaps knew subconsciously what activity the community needed most. The most important outcome of the festival was to develop a sense of cohesion, community solidarity, and unity among residents. As one community development leader said, “Festivals are [a type of] infrastructure.” It is this kind of invisible community energy that forms the foundation for all activities in a given area.

There was also progress in cooperation between local organizations. In Shishiori, the highest-level residents’ organization was the Shishiori District Promotion Association, with 23 neighborhood associations and 16 other organizations as members at the time. It was this association that led the festival, creating an implementation framework that involved the entire community, including its member organizations as well as elementary and junior high schools. As a result, the Community Council was able to secure its standing and cohesive influence in the district, leading to wider community recognition. Moreover, the

timing of the festival coincided with the resumption of activities five years after the disaster, and as such, it served as an impetus for various organizations, including the District Promotion Association, to revitalize themselves.

Building trust and integrating with the community:

There is another reason why the Community Council was able to establish itself as part of the community. As community organizations became more active, dissatisfaction with the Community Council surfaced among groups and community leaders who had previously been standing on the sidelines. This is because an organization that had been in existence for only a few years, and with many young members, had reached the point where it was coordinating district activities, a role that would normally have been performed by the District Promotion Association. One neighborhood association head remarked, “The top-level organization in Shishiori is the District Promotion Association, not the Community Council. What function does the Community Council serve, now that the recovery (phase) is coming to an end?” Some on the Community Council were disheartened and some were indignant, which almost led to a rift. It seemed that now that reconstruction had finished, the organization would have to disband.

After repeated discussions, the Community Council redefined its position as a member of the District Promotion Association. It took on the role of making recommendations about the district to the city through the association and revised its rules accordingly. Since then, when making decisions about the community, the following four groups will come together to discuss issues: the District Promotion Association, the Liaison Council

of Shishiori Neighborhood Association Heads, the Urashima District Promotion Society (which is not affiliated with the District Promotion Association), and the Community Council, which includes young people and can act as front-line personnel. As a result, the activities of the Community Council became the activities of the entire community, and Shishiori District’s self-governance system became stronger.

(2) Reach of Activities in the Community

Local reach: Another important factor in achieving the SDGs is the extent to which resident participation extends into the community and involves a broad spectrum of the population. **Figure 8-4** shows the activities of the Shishiori Community Building Council laid out along two axes.

Both the Study Committee and the City Government Roundtable Meetings incorporate resident participation in government. However, they differ in terms of their reach into the local community: a single representative of the Community Council participates in Study Committee meetings (8 meetings in total), while anyone can participate and voice their opinions in the City Government Roundtable Meetings. Similarly, there is a difference in community involvement between the initial recommendations for the “Grand Design,” which summarized residents’ opinions with the help of students, and the proposed “Vision for the Future of Shishiori,” which was developed after months of discussion by residents, and a park workshop for local junior high school students and residents. Meanwhile, activities related to the Development Phase of the Community Council, such as support for the establishment of neighborhood associations and

Figure 8-4: Activities of the Shishiori Community Building Council



Source: Author

disaster prevention activities involving the entire community, are located further up in [Figure 8-4](#). As the Community Council has taken root in the community, the reach of its activities has expanded throughout the area.

If we trace the changes in the positions of the residents' organizations, we can see that while they were fully engaged in reconstruction projects, they slightly lost touch with the community. However, the festival led them to become one with the community again, and the district began to work together on disaster prevention, neighborhood associations, and community issues (part of the transition to an "all-Shishiori" approach). The relationship with the government also changed from submitting proposals independently, to participating and collaborating through the city's institutions.

3 Issues

Burden on government: When resident participation is expanded in both scope and depth, the increased burden on both the government and the residents must be considered. On the government side, the workload will increase, especially for staff. For example, if we compare the "Study Committee" approach with the "City Government Roundtable" approach, the number of departments and staff members involved, as well as the total work time, are far greater for the latter. The same burden applies when moving horizontally across the axis toward resident collaboration. If we compare the government's task of designing a park on its own, with designing it through a residents' workshop, the latter is significantly more costly in terms of both time and effort.

In this sense, it is not necessarily true that the more resident-led or the greater the scope of participation, the better the project. Rather, it is more practical to select the most appropriate method on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration various factors such as the burden on both the government and residents, and how easily discussions can be held. What is important is that the act of listening to residents' voices be integrated into government processes and become an established part of them.

In addition, close daily contact will help minimize possible conflicts between the government and residents, and in the long run, the cost of coordination will also

fall. The Community Council was consulted frequently on questions such as "What kind of trees should be used around this facility?" and "What equipment needs to be provided at the welfare center?" The more frequent this kind of communication, the more the barriers between the organization and the government broke down.

Burden on residents: For working-age residents in particular, being involved in community development without compensation, as well as sacrificing free time and daily activities on weeknights and weekends, represents a considerable burden. This is a major factor holding back resident participation. Moreover, the greater the scope of resident participation in the community, the greater the burden. What used to be a matter for the Community Council alone to decide, now requires a meeting of four organizations to discuss and reach a decision.

Another issue that arises from closer integration with the community is the additional legwork required. If bringing together the people who had sustained the local community were to slow action or cause the younger generation to withdraw, this would defeat the purpose. At meetings of the Community Council, members (including younger members) engage in open discussion, and then the chairperson and the other two officers pass on the results to the District Promotion Association and other organizations.

On a related note, we have mentioned the importance of unity in the community, but as a practical matter, there are plenty of opportunities for relationships between groups and individuals to deteriorate. Moreover, there is no other field where human relationships and emotions affect the entire process so much. Unlike government or business, there are no salaries, and thus, no obligations for financial compensation, as well as no strict organizational hierarchy. Rather, this work relies on each individual resident's passion, motivation, and sense of mission toward the community. Citizen participation on the ground is truly a living thing, the result of behind-the-scenes efforts on the part of residents, that can only be maintained through constant mutual encouragement and care, sometimes through patient discussions and sometimes through festivals and other activities that enhance the sense of solidarity. If such participation is taken for granted, any community development plan will end up as just something on paper, ensuring its failure.

4 The Role of Government with Respect to Resident Participation in the SDGs

Here, let us consider what the government can do to support resident participation.

Indirect support to foster resident autonomy: As mentioned above, the field of resident participation is not a simple one, and a sense of unity and connectedness within the district are required as the foundation for everything, including issues handled by local governments. The government can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines and view this as a problem for residents. In some cases, the government can work to encourage discussion within the community through intermediary support groups and provide venues for residents' groups to meet and exchange information. As noted previously, promoting festivals and resident interaction can also be effective.

Administrative support for residents' self-governance: Community self-governance is facing a variety of adverse factors, such as fewer participants due to the declining number of children and demographic aging, a social climate of "putting oneself first," and an increase in the workload involved. In this context, one effective measure would be for the government to provide personnel, budgetary support, and institutional support for community development activities led by residents. In Kesennuma, the city utilizes the MIC's Community Support Staff Program to assign an administrative officer to the Community Council and subsidize the activity budget. Furthermore, a community center has been provided as an office, ensuring a connection to social education. In Kesennuma, the community center also serves as the administrative office for residents' groups such as the District Promotion Association, providing inconspicuous but strong logistical support for the residents.

Participation of local government officials in the community: By participating in residents' activities, municipal employees can gain firsthand knowledge of local needs that they cannot get at their desks, and this can then be applied when planning and implementing projects. The participation of municipal employees is a different approach for governments to take toward "communities where no one is left behind."

Human resource development to encourage resident participation: Kesennuma runs several human resource development programs tailored for individual groups, from high school students to young people, women, and active seniors, to promote resident-led community-building activities.

In addition, social education plays an important role in government efforts to foster people who can become active in civic life. After WWII, newly-built community centers and their programs and activities nurtured a sense of local belonging, pride, and attachment, as well as a sense of fellowship among residents. They also supported the development of community leaders, as exemplified by youth associations, and provided a venue for solidarity to grow. The Koizumi Community Center in Kesennuma, where the author currently works, is promoting lifelong learning and interaction among residents through lectures and other activities, as well as conducting local history classes and town tours to enhance people's knowledge of the area and foster a sense of hometown pride. Community centers play an important role as focal points of their districts, and although their role in terms of social education has changed over time, they are still needed to actively facilitate interaction between residents, foster the development of community leaders, and provide support for maintaining and strengthening local communities.

5 Conclusion

When working to realize the core objective of the SDGs in local communities, the participation of residents does not necessarily mean that every issue will be attended to. To bring us as close as possible to this goal, what is needed is for residents to participate; for the organizations that support this to take root in their communities; and for the scope of their activities to grow broader. In this case study, we showed that the most effective activities in this respect were festivals and discussions, which at first glance appear to be low-profile initiatives with results that are difficult to observe.

Given its importance, we hope to see governments provide indirect support for establishing environments where resident participation can take place. In addition, to reduce the costs of long-term resident participation, it is necessary to work on drastic institutional reforms for

resident participation now, and to make efforts to keep in close contact with residents on a daily basis.

This means that governments must be prepared to address the potential risks involved in resident participation. When residents think, discuss, and act independently, it also means that they will not just passively accept the benefits of government policies, but will critique their merits and approaches. By promoting healthy democracy from the grassroots and applying it to public administration, government services can be reexamined, and the government can transform itself to meet needs that have been previously overlooked. This kind of attitude on the part of the government will motivate and create a stronger foundation for residents to participate.

It is essential for residents and the government to work together to establish self-governance for the community as a whole. This, in turn, will lead to a society where “no one is left behind.”

Written by Chigusa Miura

Note: This chapter represents the author's personal views and not those of her organization.