

Revitalising Neighbourhood Association

Exploring the Role of Neighbourhood Association in Addressing Social Isolation in Hibarigaoka, Japan¹

Yohei Kato

Social isolation is an escalating global issue, with an increasing number of individuals experiencing it worldwide.²

This problem is particularly severe among older adults, who are at risk due to diminishing mobility, mental health, social networks, and heightened fragility associated with ageing.

In Japan, which has the world's largest older population, the phenomenon of older adults living and dying alone is rising.³ This emerging issue has sparked renewed interest in the Neighbourhood Association (NHA), which provides various programs to bring together residents of all ages. This article examines the Hibarigaoka neighbourhood in the City of West Tokyo, Japan, highlighting the NHA's crucial role in fostering social cohesion and trust, thereby addressing social isolation of older adults.

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² Lubben, J., Gironde, M., Sabbath, E., Kong, J., & Johnson, C. (2015). Social isolation presents a grand challenge for social work. *Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative, Working Paper No. 7*. <https://aaswsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/WP7-with-cover.pdf>;

Yen, I. H., Michael, Y. L., & Perdue, L. (2009).

Neighborhood environment in studies of health of older adults: A systematic review. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 37(5), 455–463.

³ Dahl, N. (2020). Governing through *kodokushi*. Japan's lonely deaths and their impact on community self-government. *Contemporary Japan*, 32(1), 83–102.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/18692729.2019.1680512>

Social Isolation and Neighbourhood-Level Interventions

The ecological framework suggests that risks of social isolation must be addressed across multiple levels: individual, relational, community, and societal.⁴ Neighbourhoods play a pivotal role at the relational and community levels, particularly for older adults. Due to age-related challenges, the quality of neighbourhood environments and interactions with neighbours become essential for their social health. Research supports neighbourhood-level interventions as effective in fostering age-friendly environments, aligning with the World Health Organisation's guidelines for enhancing older adults' independence and social connections.⁵

Neighbourhood Associations (NHAs) are key players in this realm. NHAs can be defined as groups of residents united by common objectives to improve physical conditions and overall well-being in the locality. NHAs exhibit diverse objectives,

structures, functions, and memberships worldwide.⁶

NHAs in Japan: Building Blocks of Civic Participation

In Japan, NHAs operate as self-governing, usually non-incorporated bodies that work closely with various government entities, such as the police, public schools, and local government offices.⁷ With about 85% of Japanese households participating in NHAs to varying extents,⁸ these associations are involved in community activities, including the upkeep of public spaces and organising events for children and older adults.

The value of NHAs, along with other community organisations, was highlighted following the Kobe Earthquake in 1995, recognising their significant contributions to disaster management efforts encompassing response, recovery, and preparedness.⁹ In response to the rising incidents of lonely deaths (known as “Kodokushi” or 孤独死) in Japan, the government has recently advocated for

⁴ Cotterell, N., Buffel, T., & Phillipson, C. (2018). Preventing social isolation in older people. *Maturitas*, 113, 80–84.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Van Houwelingen, P. (2012). Neighborhood Associations and Social Capital in Japan. *Urban Affairs Review*, 48(4), 467–497. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087411434906>

⁷ Taniguchi, H., & Aldikacti Marshall, G. (2016). Neighborhood association participation and formal volunteering in Japan. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27, 695–723.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

neighbourhood-level awareness and assistance, termed “Mimamori” (見守り), for older adults living alone.¹⁰ This initiative led to a renewed interest in revitalising NHAs. The Hibarigaoka Housing Project exemplifies these efforts, demonstrating how the revitalised NHA, established through multi-sectoral collaboration, contributed to fostering relationships and trust among residents.

Hibarigaoka Housing Project

The Hibarigaoka Housing Project, situated between West Tokyo and Higashikurume in Tokyo, was established in 1959 by the Japan Housing Corporation (now the Urban Renaissance Agency or UR), becoming the largest housing complex of its time with 2,714 units.¹¹ Between 1999 and 2012, UR undertook a comprehensive



¹⁰ MIC. (2023, July). *Survey on monitoring activities for elderly people living alone*. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC). https://www.soumu.go.jp/menu_news/s-news/hyouka_000164233.html Accessed 3 March 2024

¹¹ Aoki, Morita, & Eguchi. (2018). Formation of Local Resident Volunteer Organizations and Members' Attitudes in the Initial Phase of Area Management: A Case Study of the Former



revitalisation and reconstruction of the housing and neighbourhood.

Figure 1. Hibarigaoka Housing in 1959 and 2023 (Photo Credit: UR)

To foster a multi-generational community, UR engaged with private developers and a design firm, launching capacity building programs to promote residents' ability to sustain and enhance their neighbourhood. This marked UR's first public-private partnership to create a cohesive community by leveraging private expertise.¹² As part of this effort, UR and a private developer founded the Machiniwa Hibarigaoka General Incorporated Association (Machiniwa NHA) to spearhead this initiative. Machiniwa NHA's objectives include:

Hibarigaoka Housing. *Technical Report Collection of the Architectural Institute of Japan*, 24(58), 1257–1260.

¹² UR. (2017). Hibarigaoka Housing Complex: Revitalization Efforts in Hibarigaoka Housing. Urban Renaissance Agency. https://www.ur-net.go.jp/chintai_portal/rebuild/hibarigaoka/lrmhp_h000000icur-att/hibari.pdf Accessed 3 March 2024

- 1) Ensuring a neighbourhood that offers security, vitality, and a sense of belonging.
- 2) Encouraging community engagement and local revitalisation that motivates residents to collaboratively address neighbourhood challenges.
- 3) Developing a town conducive to learning, enjoyment of diverse lifestyles and life phases, and appreciation of nature and culture.

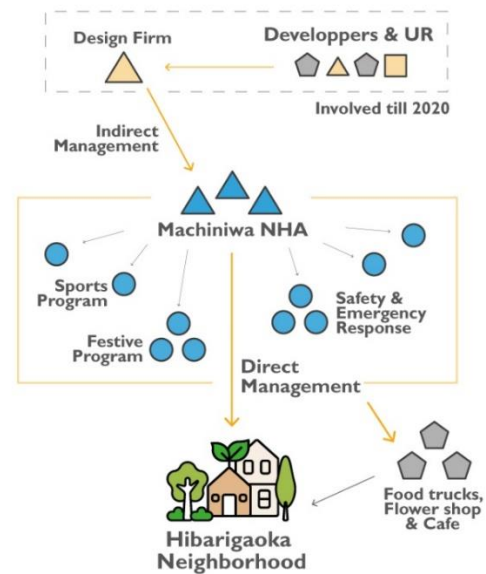


Figure 2. Stakeholders involved in establishing and managing Machiniwa NHA. (Image Credit: Author)

From Partnership Model to Resident-Led Structure

From 2015 to 2020, Machiniwa NHA comprised representatives from the residents and coordinators from the design firm, who represented private partners and UR. During this five-year period, the design firm provided administrative support and training to the residents, enabling them to eventually manage the NHA themselves. In 2020, the NHA transformed into a resident-led structure, where representatives of the residents assumed management roles, such as board of directors, auditors, and secretariat roles, without the involvement of private partners.¹³

NHA Activities

Residents in Hibarigaoka Housing have various roles and opportunities to engage with NHA. They can plan, implement, or participate in programs, such as summer festivals, cooking classes, disaster prevention awareness programs, and town-hall meetings to connect residents with local nonprofit and social welfare organisations. These programs are often held at the Hibari Terrace 118, the activity centre with facilities such as a cafe, a flower shop, and common rooms. In addition to the existing programs and committees, residents can initiate interest

¹³ Aoki, Morita, & Eguchi. (2018). Formation of Local Resident Volunteer Organizations and Members' Attitudes in the Initial Phase of Area Management: A Case Study of the Former

Hibarigaoka Housing. *Technical Report Collection of the Architectural Institute of Japan*, 24(58), 1257–1260.

groups like a sports committee, festival committee, and neighbourhood safety and emergency response committee, each offering various programs for residents.



Figure 3. Activity Centre (Hibari Terrace 118)
(Photo Credit: Machiniwa NHA)

Box 1: Welcome Party and Anniversary Gathering



Figure 4. Welcome Party (Photo Credit: Machiniwa NHA)

A welcome party, now referred to as an anniversary gathering, is an annual event hosted by the NHA with support from the residents. It aims to welcome new residents to the neighbourhood and connect them with existing residents and various interest groups. The event was converted to an anniversary gathering five years after the first round of residents settled in the neighbourhood. Both the welcome party and the anniversary gathering serve as the foundation for social relationships in the neighbourhood, leading to the formation of interest groups. For instance, one resident initiated an annual sports festival with neighbours they became acquainted with through the welcome party.

“Originally, we met at the welcome party, where we got to know each other a little better and became friends, like dads who know each other...we decided that it would be nice if we could do something fun with the kids, rather than just socializing with adults. So, we got excited on the spot and decided to host an event to play with mini 4-wheel drives. Then, eventually, we started helping with a summer festival and initiated a sports festival ourselves.”



Figure 5. Mini 4WD event hosted by a group of parents (Photo Credit: Machiniwa NHA)



Figure 6. Relay marathon hosted by a group of parents (Photo Credit: Machiniwa NHA)

Source: Machiniwa NHA Website

Interest Group as A Space for Inter-generational Collaboration

The Neighbourhood Safety and Emergency Response Committee (NSER Committee) exemplifies how the NHA facilitates resident self-organisation and collaboration. A group of residents, ranging in age from their early 30s to their 70s, connected during the annual gathering and established NSER to raise awareness about disaster prevention. Under the support of NHA's mentors and external advisers from the fire fighter association,

the committee is responsible for creating and distributing a disaster prevention manual to 119 households. Additionally, they organise educational programs to increase residents' knowledge on preparing for natural disasters and supporting each other in times of crisis. Most of the programs by NSER are conducted at the Hibari Terrace 118 and in open spaces within the neighbourhood.



Figure 7. Emergency Preparedness Workshop held by NSER (Photo Credit: Machiniwa NHA)

Strengthening Community Bonds and Facing Emerging Challenges

The annual surveys conducted by Machiniwa NHA show that residents in the neighbourhood developed a stronger sense of attachment to the neighbourhood and fostered social relationships over time

(2015 to 2019).¹⁴ The 2019 surveys (n=483) showed that about 80 percentages of residents have a strong attachment to the neighbourhood. From 2015 to 2019, there was an increase in the number of people who have someone to talk to intimately and someone to ask for a favour. Older residents, particularly, felt the sense of belonging and safety in their neighbourhoods because of the social relationships and trust they have established through a series of activities. Voluntary members of NSER echoed these findings.¹⁵

"I have made more acquaintances through our activities. These people are willing to 'join forces to collaborate to address issues if any,' so I feel more secure in my life in this neighbourhood"— NSER Member, 68 years old

"I enjoyed learning about diverse perspectives and collaborating with people of different generations. I learned the effectiveness of information technology and improved

my skills to integrate it in our activities."—NSER Member, 65 years old

It is important to note that Hibarigaoka NHA also faces several challenges. First, there has been a decline in indicators of attachment and social relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to 2022), suggesting that further efforts are necessary to recover from the era of social distancing.¹⁶ Second, over the last five years, there has been a decrease in the number of new tenants moving into the neighbourhood, leading to an expected increase in the average age of residents over time.¹⁷ This stability in the population can contribute to the development of a tighter-knit community, enhancing social cohesion and trust.¹⁸ However, at the same time, such a tight-knit community can enhance homogeneity and shared norms within a group, which may lead to a lack of diverse perspectives and ideas over time.¹⁹ As neighbourhoods across Japan are experiencing aging, this issue has emerged as a common and pressing problem that requires attention

¹⁴ Machiniawa. (2022). *Machiniwa Annual Report 2022*. Machiniwa Association. <https://machiniwa-hibari.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/questionnaire2022.pdf> Accessed 3 March 2024

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Karamatsu, R. (2022, January). "Hibarigaoka Housing Project": A New Chapter in its 50-Year

History. A New Area Management Led by Residents. *Suumo Journal*. <https://suumo.jp/journal/2022/01/25/184694/> Accessed 3 March 2024

¹⁸ Burt, R. S. (2007). *Brokerage and closure: An introduction to social capital*. OUP Oxford.

¹⁹ Ibid.

throughout the country. Therefore, looking ahead, there is an increased need to establish more diverse bridging connections within and between neighbourhoods. These bridging ties can be strengthened by supporting intergenerational activities such as NSER, and by fostering partnerships and collaboration between different neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

In Japan, the challenges of ageing and shrinking populations have led to government efforts to engage communities and various stakeholders at the neighbourhood level, particularly to counteract social isolation among older adults. The Hibarigaoka Housing case exemplifies the role of the Neighbourhood Association (NHA) in nurturing social capital, thereby bonding and bridging residents of different generations and creating a social safety net. This initiative showcases the effectiveness of multi-sector partnerships in establishing the NHA, which in turn has empowered residents to launch various community-enhancing initiatives, such as those focused on festivals, exercises, and disaster prevention. The successes and challenges encountered by the Hibarigaoka Housing project underscore

the importance of collaborative efforts and the development of individual and collective agency in mitigating social isolation.

Sources:

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Taniguchi, H., & Aldikacti Marshall, G. (2016). Neighborhood association participation and formal volunteering in Japan. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 27*, 695–723.

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