THE POTENTIAL FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION RESEARCH FOR AREA STUDIES: A PROCESS EVALUATION METHOD FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF COMMUNITY LIFE

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This paper introduces community-based action research as a new perspective and method for area studies. It discusses the potential to open a new field of area studies by actively assisting local people in understanding own local communities and in initiating improvements into own community lives. The authors discuss why community-based action research should be considered as area studies by sharing a real case using a community-based action research method. In the introduction, action research is introduced from its origin and history to its definition and tools. In the second section, the concept of a process evaluation method for community life improvement is explained. In the third section, we illustrate how this tool has assisted the local people of the Kizawa community in Niigata, Japan, in improving their own community life. The fourth section concludes by discussing the role of action research in community development and its relevance to area studies.

Key words: community-based action research, area studies, process evaluation method, endogenous community development

INTRODUCTION

Social science research generally deals with serious social and economic issues like poverty, community revitalization, school bullying, and conflict resolution. Partly due to globalization, similar problems and challenges have been seen across nations and regions. However, solutions to tackle these problems are not always the same; rather, solutions require understanding of the actual characteristics of a society, mainly because these characteristics are deeply rooted in social and economic systems heavily influenced by idiosyncratic local factors. Theoretical work does help to explain the reasons and impact of these idiosyncratic factors; however, practical study in the form of action research contributes much more to the understanding of such factors.

Recently, action research has garnered much attention by academia and practitioners as an effective research tool for area-based problems and challenges (Kusago, 2007). We believe that action research can be utilized as a unique and powerful active research tool for area studies as well as theoretical studies, since it not only expands understanding about
local communities\(^1\), but is also valuable in supporting researchers, local people, and institutions in identifying, generating and sharing knowledge and ideas related to the community itself.

Community-based action research\(^2\) is a social science research method that deals with pressing issues in a community, a group of people living in the same place or having particular characteristics in common, through collaboration by researchers and the people concerned in the community. Although we acknowledge the importance of community-based action research in the improvement of the overall quality of life of people in community, it has so far been utilized to improve the quality of human-related services such as the improvement of teaching in collaboration with students and in effectively meeting the health needs of patients.

Thus, as researchers who care about people’s well-being, we have developed a new community-based action research method and consider the method a “process evaluation method for community life improvement.” This method has some unique features in its purpose, method, and outcome in contrast to conventional research methods on community development. The action research method is concerned with helping local people to realize a higher quality of life through a bottom-up (people-centered), not top-down (expert-driven), local community development approach. This people-centered method checks up on people’s lives and community conditions through the use of regular questionnaire surveys, interviews and community meetings. This method assists local people in analyzing the data regarding changes in their own lives and in their own communities, and allows them to design concrete actions to improve their community, and to evaluate actions for further improvement. The adaptation of this method into community development brings about a strong and stable base for local autonomy through the empowerment of local people.

Community-based action research requires active collaboration between researchers and local people to solve problems in a sustainable way. In this paper, we have applied this method to a small community recovering from the 2004 Niigata Chuetsu earthquake disaster in Japan to examine whether the community-based action research model can be an alternative research tool for people-centered community development and also, to see if this method is effective in helping the process of community recovery and development.

Therefore, in this paper, we first explain the purpose and concept of the method. Next, we illustrate how this method has brought about changes and progress in a community over time. Finally, we discuss the potential of community-based action research to broaden the spectrum and the role of area studies.

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\(^1\) In this paper, a local community represents the place where people live a life and it can be found in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, which can be a hamlet, a group of hamlets and a village. The size of the community differs from community to community.

\(^2\) Community-based action research and community-based participatory research are used as a synonym of action research (see Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 8-9)
Before we introduce the case study for the improvement of a community, it is important to review how community-based action research has been developed and to highlight its characteristics.

Action research for community development

Action research can be traced back to group dynamics research created by Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1946). Since the introduction of Lewin’s work, various disciplines, including psychology, education, and organizational theory have adopted action research into their work. For instance, in the field of education, school teachers have improved their teaching methods through action research by involving teachers, parents, students and educational board members. Action research has become popular in other ways as well, for example, by providing assistance to people with disabilities, by addressing health care provisions for the elderly (Munn-Gidding & Winter, 2001; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008), and by assisting low income families. Action research has been implemented in Japan, too. Sano (2005) applied an action research method to improve English teaching methodology and Tsutsui, Emoto, Kusayanagi, and Kawana (2010) adopted the action research method to nursing-care services for the elderly.

The application of action research into community development is progressive in many developing countries. One particular form of action research called participatory learning and action (PLA) developed by Robert Chambers (1983) has been advocated as a bottom-up, people-centered approach. Chambers challenged the conventional top-down expert-driven approach for community development adopted by international aid agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Instead, Chambers proposed the importance of a bottom-up approach that respects the local people’s capability and passion to improve their own livelihood and the vitality of their own communities. This PLA method has recently become popular and resource guides of PLA (Kumar, 2002) are available and used widely around the world. Action research is a powerful research tool to assist in community development.

This trend of action research has influenced Japanese experts working in community development while Japan has faced serious depopulation and ageing issues. The importance of a shift from the top-down to the bottom-up approach in local communities has been detailed by Takeo Yamazaki (2003) based on his analysis of real local development cases by highlighting the active role of neighborhood community association. Through real collaborative activities, Ryo Yamazaki (2011) has conceptualized a practical bottom-up method as community design. He has shown how local people, as drivers of their own community development, can change and transform their own local communities through engagement with the local government, researchers, and with experts. Yamazaki presented a case of community action research design for Ama-town in Shimane prefecture as a success story to attract in-migration to this small island town. The idea of rural villages creating their own communities (Sozo-noson) has been proposed by Sasaki (Sasaki, Kawaida, & Hagiwara, 2014). Sozo-noson revitalizes rural communities using local resources and an
in-migration of highly skilled technology through young workers from large urban areas.

The importance of well-being for community life

A local community is a place where people make a living on a daily basis. Community development has been considered an issue of economic welfare. For a long time, economic measures have been used to assess and evaluate people’s life conditions following a utilitarian approach advocated by Bentham (1988). In conventional economic thought, to maximize the economic aspect of well-being, a national government gives a high priority to expansion of economic production and sets a target on economic growth rates (GDP). However, from the 1970s on, economists even started questioning if the economic aspect could indicate correctly the real level of people’s well-being (Easterlin, 1974). Various research on happiness and well-being (Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999; Frey & Stutzer, 2001; Graham, 2009) began to receive more attention in the search for the key elements to happiness in a community.

In 1990, the United Nations Development Programme published its first human development report (United Nations Development Programme, 1990) with a Human Development Index (HDI), which covers three essential elements of people’s well-being: the economic aspect, knowledge and education, and health aspects. Recently, an innovative effort has been launched by the OECD, the Global Project on Measuring the Progress of Societies, which covers multi-dimensional aspects of individual well-being. Also, we have seen national initiatives like Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH)\(^3\) and the Canadian Index of Well-being (CIW)\(^4\) as pioneering efforts in this direction.

In concerned over people’s well-being, more attention should be paid to changes in the level of well-being in a community setting. Thus, by utilizing existing scientific knowledge on well-being such as the key determinants of well-being, both the level of people’s well-being and their community conditions can be viewed in a multi-dimensional manner.

Key features of community-based action research: people-centered community development

In the case of community development, local people can influence the direction of community development. Community-based action research puts an emphasis on the importance of initiatives taken by the local people. Concrete community-based action research methods illustrate how local people can be mainstreamed into the process of community development. A set of core principles and characteristics of community-based action research are summarized by Minkler and Wallerstein, who are pioneers in community-based participatory research, as follows:

- It is participatory.
- It is cooperative, engaging community members and researchers in a joint process

\(^3\) Detailed information on GNH can be found in http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/ (accessed on 21 October 2014)

\(^4\) Detailed information on CIW can be found in https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing/ (accessed on 21 October 2014)
in which both contribute equally.
• It is a co-learning process.
• It involves systems development and local community capacity building.
• It is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives.
• It achieves a balance between research and action.

(Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 9)

In Japan, Kazuko Tsurumi (1996) conceptualized an “endogenous development model” as a people-centered community development method and this model has been transformed into bottom-up action research approaches.

Sadao Tokuno (Tokuno & Kashio, 2014) has formulated a new survey of rural community (T-gata shuraku tenken: T-shape community check-up method) and has applied the survey to marginalized communities. This method supports local people and local governments in thinking of the future prospects of the community by examining the number and the role of out-migrated children (Tashutsushi) in community development. This method starts by drawing a community map with information on members of each local household including out-migrated children who live nearby. The research team conducts questionnaire surveys and interviews to collect information to design possible future scenarios for the community and to share the results with the local government and the community members in a meeting at the local community level. In this method, experts (researchers and local governments) set a practical framework and provide options to the local people to select.

Another community-based action research method called “neighborhood study method” (Jimotogaku) exists. The neighborhood study method was created by Tetsuro Yoshimoto (2008) in the city of Minamata5, in Kumamoto prefecture, Japan. The neighborhood study method revitalizes a community locally by building confidence in local people toward their own community. This method introduces the idea of transforming the entire rural community into a living museum. Visitors to the community-museum can explore any part of the community freely with a local curator. The local curator walks with the visitors and responds to any of their inquiries. The questions asked by the visitors give local curators an opportunity to rethink the local community. This neighborhood walk scheme allows local people to rediscover local resources by interactions with outsiders. For the visitors, this community provides an eye-opening walk through valuable rural community life.

This method creates an opportunity for local people to interact with people from outside the community. With the adoption of this method, the number of visitors to Kagumeishi, the community in Minamata which first implemented this method, has increased over the years and local people’s perceptions about the community have changed from negative to positive. Over a decade of continuous efforts of using the neighborhood study method in this community, local women have recognized the value of locally grown

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5 Minamata has been known widely because of the Minamata disease problem, which was caused by eating seafood contaminated with organic mercury discharged from the Chisso factory after the 1950s.
products, and they have formed a local women’s group to start a locally produced food business, which has become successful. In short, this method has gradually made local people reflect on their own communities from the eyes of the outsiders, and this method has encouraged them to take actions to revitalize their own community with the ideas stimulated by the interactive activities. Although the neighborhood study method helps local people in their opportunity to transform their perceptions toward community and to act in community-based activities, the method cannot scientifically explain if and to what extent it improves the community condition and well-being of the local people over time.

Therefore, acknowledging the strength of community-based action research and the needs for the improvement of people’s well-being through a people-centered sustainable scheme of community check-ups, the authors have developed a new community-based action research method for community revitalization as a systematic scheme that measures the well-being and progress of the lives of people in a community.

**Scheme of the Process Evaluation Method for the Improvement of Community Life**

The process evaluation method was created by the authors through their involvement in the revitalization of a small community severely damaged by the 2004 Chuetsu earthquake in Niigata prefecture in Japan. In this section, the outline of the process evaluation method is explained before its application is introduced into the actual community.

The process evaluation method for community life improvement induces ideas and actions in local people regarding how to improve their own community life and as shows them how to tracing changes in their own community’s life conditions by themselves. With the adoption of this method, local people can assess the present situation of their own local community, and identify what needs to be maintained/changed in the community. In this manner, local people can modify community development activities to improve the conditions of their own lives in their own communities.

It is important to explain how unique this method is by comparing conventional research methods used only for studies of community development and this method of process evaluation used for actual life improvement in an actual community.

As shown in Fig. 1, in conventional research method, researchers conduct community assessment with scientific tools such as questionnaire surveys and analysis of objective data collected by the government. On the other hand, in the case of the process evaluation method for the improvement of community life, researchers collaborate with local people in a horizontal relationship. The process evaluation method finds facts using surveys, interviews and community meetings. Various aspects of gathered community data are

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6 This method is partially based on the community-dock method developed by Nishibe and Kusago (2012) to support local communities in the introduction of local currency.
7 This figure is created based on Table 1–10 (page 29) in Nishibe and Kusago (2012).
given back to local people for community-based discussion and to make concrete actions for community development. For this reason, an interdisciplinary approach needs to be incorporated into the process evaluation method. Local people play an active and positive role in the process evaluation method although they are seen as inactive and passive in the conventional research method. In this sense, there is a clear difference in research methodology between the two. The conventional method relies heavily on assessment of a community’s living conditions measured by data with economic and social indicators. On the other hand, the process evaluation method strives to trace an economic social change of the community by utilizing not only extensive data on basic local living conditions but also on the people’s own subjective satisfaction and assessment from the vantage point of local people trying to realize sustainable community development. Differences can also be found in the style of outputs. The process evaluation method for the improvement of community life does not end by publishing and reviewing academic papers. Rather, the process evaluation method focuses on giving feedback to local people in community meetings and workshops, using community improvement proposals, and in providing action reports. In creating a plan of implementation, the difference between the process evaluation method for the improvement of community life and the conventional research method is clear. The process evaluation method requires flexibility in
implementation which allows different stakeholders of the community to adjust original plan and policy ideas through the process of community development.

Fig. 2 shows the outline of this process evaluation method for the improvement of community life. In the first stage of the evaluation process an initial local life assessment survey is conducted. This baseline survey has been designed and implemented jointly by a team of researchers and local people, and the full results of the baseline assessment will be given back to the local people. After this survey is conducted, the locals discuss their present and future roles in their community, based on what they have learned from the survey. They can decide what kind of local activities are needed and what can be done to improve the condition of their community’s life. To prepare a second survey, the researchers reexamine the survey questionnaire by consulting local people as to whether any revisions are needed. Once the survey tool is prepared, a second survey is conducted and its results can be shared with local people again for further assessment of their own local community lives and activities, and once again, they can modify their activities to further improve the local conditions of their lives. This method basically repeats the cycle of conducting the community assessment survey and sharing its results with community members, who assist the locals in initiating proactive local action to improve their lives. This method, although it has commonality with the T-shape community check-up method and the neighborhood study method in collaboration with local people, differs in that it puts a bottom-up
systematic scheme in place for community development.

The key to this process evaluation method is to encourage local people to use the survey results to review both positive and negative outcomes of local community activities from various viewpoints of certain community members. If locals assess some community activities as positive, locals can think of way(s) to maintain the positive activities; on the other hand, if they identify negative or weak activities, they will have the opportunity to think of new ideas to correct negative situations. In the next section, we discuss the case of the Kizawa community in Niigata prefecture that has introduced this process evaluation method since 2010 to understand how it works in practice.

**Practice of the Process Evaluation Method: The Case of the Kizawa Community**

*Needs for rebuilding the Kizawa community after the earthquake*

Kizawa is a mountainous community over 300 meters high located in Kawaguchi district, Nagaoka city, Niigata prefecture. Kizawa receives some of the highest snowfall in Japan with approximately 3 meters or more of snow each winter. On the 23rd of October, 2004, a huge earthquake called the Niigata Chuetsu earthquake struck the Chuetsu area in Niigata. Kizawa was the epicenter of the earthquake and suffered severe damage. Most houses were destroyed and one elderly woman was killed. Although the Kizawa community have had aging and depopulation issues like other Japanese rural areas even before the disaster occurred, the earthquake aggravated their problems. Just before the earthquake, 138 people and 52 households resided in Kizawa, but by March 2014, after the earthquake, there were only 71 people and 33 households, and the percentage of people over 65 years old increased from 35% to over 50%.

In April 2006, local people in Kizawa formed a community-based organization called “Friendship Kizawa” to address the aging and depopulation issues. After the earthquake, Friendship Kizawa became active in restoring the community and many young volunteers, who were mainly university students from urban areas, participated in these activities. The volunteers admired Kizawa’s abundant local resources such as the delicious rice and vegetables grown in the highlands, as well as the various types of edible wild plants and the beautiful landscape with a sea of clouds. The local people in Kizawa did not value their natural resources as highly as the outsiders because after living in the area for so long, they became immune to the beauty and abundance of their area. However, they gradually realized the richness of their local community through frequent interactions with the young volunteers.

Friendship Kizawa organized local events. For example, they started several tours such as the “edible wild plants tour” for visitors. They also developed a unique map of Kizawa which showed many of the local resources. In parallel with these events and activities, the locals convened workshops to discuss their future. Especially during winters of 2007 and 2008, they set goals and strategies to receive newcomers from the urban areas to revitalize their community. In April 2010, they finally decided to resuscitate the closed
local elementary school as a municipal guest house, called, *Yamaboushi* (the name of a tree), so that visitors could easily stay and enjoy the Kizawa community, and the local economy could get on its feet. When the authors and the locals agreed to collaborate on the process evaluation method for the improvement of community life within the Kizawa community, Kizawa was faced with a new challenge; namely, how could they achieve sustainable community development with local resources?

*Progress of the process evaluation method in the Kizawa community*

Miyamoto, one of the authors of this paper, first visited Kizawa on October 2005 as a member of the support group “Chuetsu-Fukko Network” which is an intermediary organization founded after the earthquake. Miyamoto has continued fieldwork there and has assisted its community-centered revitalization of the Kizawa community. The other author, Kusago, has conducted fieldwork there since 2009 by joining Miyamoto in the community’s revitalization process.

In the Spring of 2010, the Kizawa community made an important transition by creating *Yamaboushi*. The operation of *Yamaboushi* was a challenge to the community organization already in place, Friendship Kizawa, because *Yamaboushi* is a trial to bring not only vitality but also sustainability to the community. *Yamaboushi* created jobs right in the Kizawa community so that local people could earn incomes in their own community. *Yamaboushi* might be effective in bringing back to Kizawa out-migrated children who live nearby. It is hoped that Kizawa can utilize *Yamaboushi* to resolve aging and depopulation issues which are not solved through frequent interactions with young volunteers.

The authors, the president and the vice president of Friendship Kizawa informally met several times to exchange views on the future of the Kizawa community and shared the local people’s concerns. The president and the vice president of Friendship Kizawa said that they wanted to check whether current activities including *Yamaboushi* can contribute to an improved community life or not. We recognized the strong needs for this community to have a comprehensive assessment of the present situation of their community. The authors and the locals agreed to collaborate by using the process evaluation method for the improvement of community life.

The authors prepared the survey questionnaire in consultation with the key members of Friendship Kizawa (chairperson, vice chairpersons and treasurer). The questionnaire consisted of individual attributes (age, gender, educational background, and experience of migrant work) and household characteristics (household structure, level of household economy\(^8\), and degree of housing damage by the earthquake), subjective questions about well-being such as happiness and life satisfaction, assessment of institutions and organizations dealing with the Kizawa community, participation of the people of Kizawa in local events, and a general, freely descriptive part asking the locals about their favorite parts of Kizawa and where they would like to bring guests. The complete responses of

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\(^8\) We asked respondents to choose a level of household economy from upper, middle and lower standard of living, instead of asking household income, because the Japanese people do not feel comfortable by answering exact amounts of their own income.
the local people were considered and the baseline survey was conducted in May, 2010, and follow-up surveys were conducted in December 2010 and March 2013. In the Spring of 2012, the purpose of the process evaluation method and the result of the baseline survey were shared with the residents of Kizawa by distributing an article produced by the authors (Kusago & Miyamoto, 2012) with detailed survey results. Furthermore, in August 2012, the authors conducted focus group interviews with local men and women, and received the local people’s views on the survey results and the process evaluation method itself. The views expressed in the interview meetings greatly helped the authors to modify the survey questionnaire for the second and the third follow-up surveys.

In November 2013, the authors and Friendship Kizawa co-hosted workshops based on the result of the third follow-up process evaluation survey. We conducted two workshops, one in the afternoon and the other in the evening. The number of participants in the afternoon workshop was 7 (5 men and 2 women), and in the evening workshop 20 (15 men and 5 women). Participants of this workshop included local people, the city office staff, and Kizawa community supporters. In the workshop, these groups shared their own views on local life conditions in Kizawa by evaluating the pros and cons of Kizawa. In this way, the process evaluation method for the improvement of community life progressed as shown in Chart 1: In the first step, the baseline survey was designed and conducted; in the second step, assessment of the baseline data by members of community was completed; in the third step, discussion and dialogue among local people about the conditions of their community based on the assessment was discussed; in the fourth step, reflections on local activities and a continuation of local actions were done by the local people involved in the activities; and in the fifth step, the second survey was designed, and finally, in the sixth step, the whole cycle was repeated again.

**Effectiveness of the process evaluation method in the Kizawa community**

In this section, we review how effective the process evaluation method applied in the Kizawa community has been in improving local life conditions from the 1st initial survey in 2010 to the 3rd survey in 2013.

1. **Survey design and data gathering**

The authors formed a survey team with graduate students and local people, and developed the initial survey questionnaire. In particular, we obtained advice from local people, such as what kind of questions were relevant to evaluate the living conditions of their community and the best format to use for the questionnaire. We conducted all of the surveys door-to-door. The total number of local people who participated in the 1st and 3rd

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9 The 2nd survey was carried out in the same year as the 1st survey to ask questions about local activities to complement the 1st survey. Thus, we did not use the 2nd survey results to measure changes of the Kizawa community.

10 We selected participants with Friendship Kizawa’s help. We conducted the focus group interviews for men and women, separately, because local women tend not to speak out in front of local men in community meetings.

11 Detailed discussion over the effectiveness of the process evaluation can be found in Miyamoto & Kusago (2014).
surveys was 36 men and 19 women, and the average age of the respondents was around seventy years old\(^\text{12}\).

2. Example of survey report and assessment of the local conditions of life through the process evaluation method in Kizawa

To illustrate what kind of reports the research team prepared, part of the survey report made after the 3rd survey done in 2013 is shown below with key findings regarding local people’s own assessment of their quality of life and community conditions.

(a) Happiness and its determinants

Two questions were asked to capture the level of happiness and the elements of happiness of the Kizawa people.

1. What is your level of happiness between 0 (very unhappy) and 10 (very happy)?
2. Which things do you consider important when you think of your level of happiness?
   (choose all relevant)
   Household economy, Job, Health, Free time and leisure, Work/Hobby/Social Contribution, Family relations, Friendships, Working relations, Local community relations

These two questions were adopted from the National Survey on Lifestyle carried out by the Japanese Cabinet Office in 2009–2010.

Fig. 3 shows the results of the first questionnaire given on the level of happiness. The average level of happiness was 7.3 for the 1st survey and 6.9 for the 3rd survey\(^\text{13}\). In the 3rd survey, people with a low level of happiness, 2 and 3, were identified, while there were none with these scores in the 1st survey.

Fig. 4 shows the results of the question:
Which things do you consider important when you think of your level of happiness?

The overall trend did not change much between the 1st and 3rd survey results. Health, family relations, friendship and household income were considered important by many of the community people. Hobbies, social contributions, and human relationships at work were chosen as less important while jobs, free time and leisure, family relations, friendship, and local community relationships were chosen as more important. In the Kizawa community, between the 1st and the 3rd surveys, some respondents had retired from work and their community relations became more significant.

The comparison between the Kizawa survey data and the National Survey on Lifestyle data (Rural CAO data)\(^\text{14}\) reveals the uniqueness of the Kizawa people in their perception of

\(^{12}\) The response rate for the 1st and the 3rd surveys were 52\% and 62\%, respectively. We informally checked the reasons for not participating in the surveys and health conditions and absence were major reasons. We covered most of households of the Kizawa community.

\(^{13}\) We conducted a t-test if there was a significant difference between the two survey results on the level of happiness and found that there was no significant change. The results were t(35) = 0.916, p = 0.366.

\(^{14}\) This data was collected by the Japanese Cabinet Office and the sampling of the data covers the entire Japanese society. For a meaningful comparison, the data used in this paper is for nation-wide rural communities and we specify this data as Rural CAO.
a happy life and a happy community. The CAO data shows that 16.7% of the respondents in rural communities in Japan considered local community relations as important, while more than 40% of the Kizawa people considered it as important. For the people in Kizawa, the local community itself was described as critical to maintaining their level of happiness. Over the two years from the 1st to the 3rd surveys, the number of local people who considered local community relations, friendships and family relations as an important...
factor went up\textsuperscript{15}, which suggests that after the earthquake the Kizawa community began to take on a more significant meaning and the level of social capital grew year by year.

Next, the survey asked about a means to increase one’s level of happiness as follows:

3. Please tell us effective measures to keep and increase the level of happiness by selecting one or two close to your thought.

Fig. 5 shows the result of this question. The 1st and the 3rd survey results were not much different. The Kizawa people considered good relations with their own family the most important factor in keeping a high level of happiness and a good relationship with their friends was considered equally important. If we compare the responses of Kizawa’s local people to the national government survey responses (Rural CAO), it appears that the Kizawa people rely more on others than in the national average. The authors assumed that the Kizawa local people considered government support important because Kizawa was hit hard by the earthquake in 2004. However, the local people viewed local relations—family, neighbors and friends—as being much more important than government support.

An open-ended question was also asked about the local people’s perceptions of happiness: For example, \textit{what do you need for happiness}?

Changes in the local people’s views about their own happiness were illustrated by this question. We reported our analysis of the data obtained by the open-ended questions after we extracted keywords referred to by the Kizawa people. The most used keywords were “family” and “health.” These most often used keywords were consistent with the results

\textsuperscript{15} We conducted a t-test if there was a significant difference between the two survey results on important items for the level of happiness and found that changes of family relations and friendships were weakly significant between the two surveys. The results were $t(35) = 2.223$, $p < 0.05$ (for both), but not significant for local community relations.
on the question for factors of happiness. In their free descriptions, the local people described how special the Kizawa community is for them. For instance, in the 3rd survey, local people expressed how special their relationships were with their friends in Kizawa. “Born in Kizawa. Always with my friends who went to school together. There are no strangers in this community and I appreciate the strong bonds among us in Kizawa” (female, 80s).

In addition, we asked the following open-ended question: When was the happiest moment in your life? For this question, we extracted keywords and learned that the most used keywords were health, self, and family. One respondent wrote “As long as I feel healthy, I can do anything I like to do. But, without health, money means nothing” (male, 60s). Another wrote “Two of us as husband and wife can do farming together and help each other” (male, 60s), and “two of us can go anywhere and have money to eat out with our grandchildren” (female, 70s).

(b) Changes in happiness and life satisfaction according to age

Reporting changes in community life is a critical step in the process evaluation method because it helps local people assess the conditions of community life based on the data. The research team presented one survey outcome by showing the frequency distribution chart of the level of happiness with the ratio of the 3rd survey score divided by the 1st survey score according to age. Fig. 6 shows the distribution of the level of happiness by age. It appears that the level of happiness of ages in the 60s, 70s, 80s and above changed little. However, the age group of 50s showed a drastic change from the 1st to the 3rd survey. The level of happiness went down to almost 0.6 (=60%) after the 1st survey was conducted. In the feedback session, this finding caught the local people’s eyes and they discussed why the level of happiness dropped so much in their 50s. They discussed issues related to the situations and issues surrounding local people in their 50s in Kizawa. Aging and depopulation problems have caused people in their 50s to still have to take on the
responsibilities of young adults. They often had to take care of older family members and attend various local activities besides working daily in their regular jobs.

c) Anxiety and concern

The community life survey also asked a question about anxiety and concern. The question was phrased as follows:

Do you feel anxiety or concern in your daily life? If you do, please describe such anxiety or concerns.

Fig. 7 shows the anxiety and concern shared by some locals from Kizawa. Those who responded that they have anxiety or concerns was just above 60%. This percentage went up from the 1st to the 3rd survey. The local people were mostly concerned or anxious about their own health or the health of their family. The authors and researchers applied coding analysis to the freely descriptive answers and found that many people worried about the possibility of living and being alone if her/his partner passes away. This concern does reflect a harsh reality of the Kizawa community. One local wrote, “In the future, one of us will die. When I think of that day, I am very much worried about my life” (female, 60s). In the 3rd survey, similar concerns were voiced.

d) Evaluation of people’s participation in community events

The aim of this process evaluation method is to improve community life; thus, the method should also assess the local people’s interests and involvements in community activities. Our team asked local people about the frequency of their participation in local events.

Fig. 8 shows the percentage of local people who participated in major community events in 2013. The Kizawa community has three major events: a local field day, an informal get-together (assembly) with neighbors (Yoriaikko), and the Kizawa Bon-Odori.

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16 The number of local activities in 2013 was different from that in 2010 so we did not compare them.
festival (dance honoring the spirits of one’s ancestors). Local people are expected to participate in these events. The local field day started in 2004 when the local elementary school was closed down as continuation of the school’s sports day event. The Yoriaikko event started, before the 2004 earthquake, to create an opportunity to promote friendship among local people and also to celebrate the Autumn harvest. This festival requires local people to prepare local foods and run activities for the festival. The Kizawa Bon-Odori festival has been run annually by the local community for generations.

Another bon odori festival in the area that includes the Kizawa community is the Nijyumurago Bon-Odori. Four communities in Nijyumurago decided to form a joint odori committee after these communities also suffered devastation after the 2004 earthquake. Every four years, 4 different communities rotate hosting the festival.

The Kizawa community has organized the Futago mountain sidewalk improvement event. Agurinosato is a road-side station (Michi-no-eki) run by a local organization in the town of Kawaguchi, the nearest town to the Kizawa community, where local people can sell their agricultural products. Summer and winter festivals are retreats for visitors started by a group of university students who formed a supporting group to assist the recovery of the Kizawa community.

Fig. 8 shows that more than 90% of the local people participated in both the local field day and Yoriaikko. Interestingly, the participation rate for the area-based Nijyumurago Bon-Odori festival was higher than that for the Kizawa community’s Bon Odori festival. The Nijyumurago Bon-Odori festival is a new event that started as a symbol for recovery from the earthquake by promoting mutual assistance among the four communities. One community could not maintain its community-based Bon-Odori because of the decrease in the local population. However, the start of the Nijyumurago Bon-Odori offered hope for the residents in this community. The Nijyumurago Bon-Odori has become a popular local event and people in all of the four communities get along well with each other. This survey result reveals cultivation of a new local way of life which could go beyond the boundary of a single local community.

Fig. 8. Local participation in major community events
(N = 36; %)
3. Feedback sessions with local people

The research team prepared a report based on the survey results to share with local people. In November 2013, a feedback session at the Kizawa community was organized so that local people could learn the key findings of the process evaluation surveys. In this feedback session, local people, leaders of key local organizations, city office staff, and local NPOs supporting Kizawa participated and discussed Kizawa community life. The process evaluation method helped provide feedback to the community and encouraged the community to share ideas on their own improvement. In the feedback session in the Kizawa community, opinions and ideas expressed by the participants were:

- Some local people did not know about new local businesses, such as running *Yamaboushi*, which exemplifies the importance of getting information out to the community.
- The survey data should be analyzed by individual attributes such as gender and age group, which would provide concrete measures for improving the Kizawa community and other communities.
- On a personal level as a member of the supporting agency for Kizawa, I found the information in this survey helpful in realizing how active the Kizawa people are in revitalizing their community after the earthquake.
- From the data, I was surprised to learn of the low level of happiness among local people in their 50s. I think we should act immediately to remedy this situation because it is a problem related to the future and well-being of the whole community.

Although the local people in Kizawa felt somewhat different extents of happiness amongst themselves, they didn’t know that there was such a huge gap between people in their 50s and the other locals. These comments suggest that the local people in Kizawa have realized current pressing issues in their community and have felt a sense of urgency about them.

4. Local action after the feedback session

One more important step of this process evaluation method is whether local people reflect what they have been working on to improve community life and initiate “concrete action” after the survey results are shared through a feedback meeting.

Surveys were conducted and their results were shared among local people. In particular, key members of Friendship Kizawa and community association were informed over the situation of their community. After the feedback session, they started thinking of learning from other communities that has been successful in attracting people from outside their immediate community and they discussed visits to such communities.

Also, in the Kizawa community, there was a young male intern who assisted the Friendship Kizawa in its operation of *Yamaboushi*, a municipal guest house, for one year from April 2013. Immediately after the meeting in November 2013, the intern proposed starting an informal gathering over informal food and drink to talk more about the community issues in an open and candid way. This gathering started in late December 2013 and continued six times until March 2014. In one meeting, those who joined this gathering exchanged
views about snow-removal, a hardship in Kizawa, and set forth a concrete plan to revise the present snow-removal scheme to ease the burden on people in the 50s and under, which was revealed through the surveys. To this purpose, the meeting also invited a resource person from a neighboring community who had successfully utilized a public financial support scheme for snow-removal to study if the Kizawa community could apply for similar support. In this way, both reflections on the activities initiated by local people and discussions for future community-based actions have been spurred on survey results and feedback sessions.

**Effectiveness and Prospects for Using the Process Evaluation Method for Community Development**

This paper has focused on the potential of action research for improving the well-being of people and society. It has reviewed the history and main features of action research. Because of the rapid changes in contemporary society, the quality of life and the quality of society have also changed and have become of great interest for researchers involved in action research. The ‘local community’ is no doubt a base for anyone who wants to study and make an impact on the quality of life. One challenge we have faced is how to find a way to work with the initiatives of local people toward this goal. The process evaluation method has potential as a new tool for community development as can be seen in the case of the Kizawa community. This method assisted the Kizawa people in reflecting on both their accomplishments and needs after the Chuetsu earthquake. The method is unique because it depends highly on voluntary actions by the local people. The conventional approach for community revitalization is often a top-down solution which assumes that local people will follow the government’s plans and instructions. In the case of the process evaluation method, if people do not take autonomous action (separate from the government, for example) to improve their own community, change will not be effective. The process evaluation method cannot be effective without people’s intrinsic actions, which push them to reflect, to discuss, and to find solutions to improve living conditions in their own community. This method, although it includes the word, “evaluation” in its name, is not used to determine if the local effort is a success or a failure in the way that donor agencies usually do; rather, it supports the local people to initiate actions from their own problems and concerns to achieve a high level of community life.

The process evaluation method, an action research tool, has the potential to create a bridge between action researchers and area study experts, since the process evaluation, if it is applied to a community setting, requires an extraordinary understanding of the local area in terms of its social, economic, cultural, political and environmental aspects. The method can be viewed as a practical research tool for area studies which not only expands knowledge, but also encourages local people to actively learn, cultivate, and use this tool for the development of their own communities.
REFERENCES


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