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Social Equity in Japan

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Introduction

This chapter examines the status of social equity in the context of Japan. To the best of the author's knowledge, the concept of social equity has not been widely discussed or well understood in the field of Japanese public administration and politics. However, although the term *social equity* has not been explicitly used, one can identify several policies and administrative practices in Japan that serve a similar purpose: addressing various dimensions of disparities among citizens. I argue that regional disparity is one of these dimensions of social equity that Japanese public policy and politics have addressed and been most successful in solving in the last few decades.

Reducing the inequity of citizens' access to basic public services and infrastructure throughout the country and addressing interregional income differences was a primary policy and political concern in Japan after the rapid economic growth period (the mid-1950s to the early 1970s) (Abe & Alden, 1988; DeWit, 2002; DeWit & Steinmo, 2002; Han, 2010; Song, 2015). Japan has achieved remarkably low levels of regional disparity in several dimensions among OECD member countries (OECD, 2016a, 2016b) through various political and policy schemes. Although the recent years have seen growing regional gaps (Han, 2010; Song, 2015), concerns for equal distribution of public services and equalization of regional development seem to be still high among politicians and public administrators in Japan. Furthermore, the recent municipal merger reform from 1999 to 2010, which aimed at increasing municipal efficiency through consolidation of municipalities, has raised concerns about the disparity in quality of municipal services not only among municipalities (intermunicipal inequalities) but also within municipal boundaries (intra-municipal inequalities). In

enlarged municipalities after merger, inequity of citizens' access to municipal services and facilities has become a critical concern for local public administrators, politicians, and scholars (Hatakeyama, 2013; Maruyama, 2017; Suzuki & Sakuwa, 2016; Yamada, 2018).

The main goal of this chapter is to elucidate Japan's social equity approach, highlighting the regional equity dimension. The first part of this chapter provides a brief overview of social equity in academic literature and discusses the importance of more global approaches to studies of social equity. The second part of the chapter provides an overview of inequity issues in Japan. The third part shows how the Japanese government has approached and addressed regional inequity in the post-war period. Finally, the author conclude this chapter with suggesting future research agendas and discussing how Japan's case can contribute to the study of social equity in general.

Social Equity from a Global Perspective

As discussed in previous studies on social equity (Gooden & Portillo, 2011; Wooldridge & Bilharz, 2017; Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009), the concept of social equity has its roots in Western political thought beginning with Aristotle and Plato. The concept of social equity in public administration has been mainly developed in the context of American public administration, rooted in the first Minnowbrook conference in 1968 (Gooden & Portillo, 2011; Guy & McCandless, 2012; Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). Researchers should keep in mind the unique context of the U.S. with high levels of racial diversity and income disparities associated with it when broadening the scope of research to other countries. There should be a dissociation between the understanding and concept of social equity among American public administration scholars and those in other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, countries in the Asia-Pacific region are highly heterogeneous in terms of ethnicity, religion, levels of economic development, characteristics of bureaucracy, the degree of decentralization, and levels of democracy. Therefore, as seen from the rest of chapters in this book, country approaches to social equity and the areas of inequity on which scholars focus will also largely differ even within the same region.

Social equity tends to become a focus in areas where social disparities are most glaring. In the U.S. case, most existing studies on social equity have centered on the disparities caused by race,

gender, and class (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). Recently, issues such as sexuality, religion, economic status, and mental and physical disabilities have been also added to the scope of social equity research (Wooldridge & Bilharz, 2017). However, areas of social inequity and what people think of as social inequity are not the same across countries. They may depend on a country's history, philosophical ideas, religion, levels of economic development, and political and administrative systems. To what extent do citizens' views toward social equity differ across countries? How significant is the concept of social equity in countries which emphasize other social values such as the stress on efficiency in Singapore? How do countries which do not have large racial disparities but had had regional disparities in the past such as Japan approach social equity? How are focus areas of social equity policy associated with the level of economic development? When does social equity become "a guiding principle in public decision making" (Guy & McCandless, 2012, p. 510) among public administrators and what roles do politicians play in this?

As Wooldridge and Gooden (2009) argue, the concept of social equity should be considered in a global context to disentangle the role of contextual effects on the concept and focus of social equity. Such a comparative approach also corresponds to the recent increased scholarly attention on the effects of various national and organizational factors on management and performance (Meier, Rutherford, & Avellaneda, 2017; O'Toole & Meier, 2014). As Milward et al. (2016) argue, researchers should not behave as if "all states are alike" (p.312) as treated in the public management literature. Each country in the Asia-Pacific region is distinctive.

Social inequity in Japan

As in other countries, social inequity exists in many areas in Japanese society. In general, Japan has been regarded as a model for having achieved both economic development and high equality from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, by which point it had become a solidly middle-class society (Chiavacci, 2008; Kobayashi, 2018). However, after the collapse of bubble economy in the early 1990s, the perception of Japan as a middle-class society has begun to change. In fact, Japan has experienced an increase in income inequality and relative poverty levels during the past thirty years (OECD, 2017). In 2012, the percentage of households which make less than half the country's median

income, known as the relative poverty rate, reached 16.1%. Japan is ranked 7th among OECD member countries in relative poverty. The word, *kakusa* (disparity or inequality), has become a buzzword since the late 1990s, and Japan as a divided society model has spread (Chiavacci, 2008; Song, 2015).

In addition to the recent increase in the income gap, several dimensions of social disparity in Japan have been discussed. They include, for instance, region, gender, employment status (regular/non-regular workers), generation, physical and mental disabilities, and race/ethnicity. One of the notable features that social equity researchers and practitioners should keep in mind is that Japan has relatively small population of minorities. Although recently a view of Japan as multicultural society has emerged (Okano & Tsuneyoshi, 2010; Siddle, 2011), the image of Japan as culturally and racially homogeneous society remains strong. Although Japan has a number of minority population such as indigenous peoples including *Ainu*, *Okinawans*, descendants of Koreans and Chinese who came to Japan during the colonial period, and *buraku* people (people in outcast communities) (Okano & Tsuneyoshi, 2010), the population of minority groups is a much lower proportion than in other countries, including countries in the Asia-Pacific areas. For instance, the ethnic fractionalization index, which involves a combination of both racial and linguistic characteristics, is 0.012 in Japan in 2015 (ranked 185th out of 187 countries in the data set), whereas Indonesia records 0.74 (ranked 29th), Thailand 0.63 (53th), Bhutan 0.61 (60th), Myanmar 0.51 (82th), the US records 0.49 (88th), India 0.42 (97th), China 0.15 (153th) (Teorell et al., 2017).[1] Social equity researchers and practitioners should keep this distinctive feature of Japan's population in mind when considering social equity in Japan.[2]

Given such a relatively homogeneous ethnic background, policy arguments pertaining to diversity and inequity in Japan tend to focus on other dimensions such as gender (Shinohara, 2017) and regional disparity. Gender is one of the vectors along which Japanese society has experienced and

[1] Data is originally from Alesina, Devleeschauwer, Easterly, Kurlat, and Wacziarg (2003).
[2] The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication has promoted "multicultural coexistence" (*tabunka kyosei*), which aims at increasing awareness and understanding of different cultures, especially those of foreign residents, at the municipal or local level (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, n.d.). However, such policy initiatives have not been extensively pursued from the perspective of promoting equity among citizens with minority background.

continues to experience significant inequity. Japan is ranked very low among OECD member and non-member countries in many dimensions of gender equity. The gender wage gap, which is "the difference between median earnings of men and women relative to median earnings of men," is 24.5 percentage points, ranked 3rd following South Korea and Estonia among OECD member and related countries (OECD, 2018a). The percentage of female employees with managerial responsibility in the private sector was only 9 % in 2014 (OECD, 2017). There are many reasons for such high gender inequity, including the influence of Confucianism (Sugihara & Katsurada, 2002), employment practices such as life-time employment, seniority, long-work-hour culture, and a masculine organizational culture (Dalton, 2017; Nemoto, 2013).

Women are also underrepresented in Japanese public administration and politics (Bochel & Bochel, 2005; Bochel, Bochel, Kasuga, & Takeyasu, 2003; Eto, 2010; Shinohara, 2017; Shinohara, Zhang, & Riccucci, 2016; Suzuki & Avellaneda, 2018). The percentage of women in national level politics (i.e. parliamentarians) was only 9.3 in 2017, which records the lowest among 35 OECD member and non-member countries (OECD, 2018b). Women are also under-represented in public administration. The percentage of female national public employees recruited through merit examinations was 33.9 % in 2018. The share of female national employees with managerial positions (*kakari cho*) was 24.2 % in 2017 (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2018).[3] As in the argument of gender inequity in the private sector, Japan's male-dominant culture and values are often considered as one of the critical sources for gender inequity in the Japanese public administration (Shinohara, 2017). As Shinohara argues, although groupism, which was originated in the ancient Confucian values and rice farmers' practices, has helped organizations to achieve a high level of efficiency and effectiveness, individuals' needs and goals tend to be less prioritized in organizations with strong group-oriented values. In particular, women's particular needs such as maternity leave and parental leave, tend to be less prioritized in Japan's male-dominant culture (Shinohara, 2017). In addition, there has been still strong beliefs that parenting is men's job in Japan. Very few percentage of Japanese men take parental leaves even though Japan has one of the most generous paternity leave among developed nations

[3] See Shinohara (2017) and Suzuki and Avellaneda (2018) for gender in Japanese public administration.

(Narula, 2016). It is no doubt that such male-dominant culture and values are one of the major obstacles for gender equity in the Japan's public administration.

Several policy and legislative initiatives have been made, including the enactment of the national Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986, the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999, and the recent womenomics policy by the Abe Administration, which aims at the empowerment of women (Dalton, 2017; Shinohara et al., 2016). Since Prime Minister Abe took over his office again in December 2012, his Cabinet has put a priority on policies to increase women in leadership positions. PM Abe's economic plan, "Abenomics", has three pillars: fiscal injection, aggressive monetary policy, and womenomics. One of the core of the womenomics policy is to set numerical targets of share of women in leadership positions at least 30 % by 2020 in all fields, including politics, central government, local government, private sector, and education and research fields (Dalton, 2017).[4] In August 2015, the Japanese Diet passed "the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace" (*Josei Katsuyaku Suishin Hou*). This law demands that the national government, local governments, and private organizations with more than 300 regular employees shall develop and announce a plan concerning promotion of women within their organizations. The local Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare office accredits the plans. Organizations with good performance in terms of women's participation can obtain recognition from the government, which brings some advantages in public procurement and financial loan from the Japan Finance Corporation, a public corporation wholly owned by the Japanese government (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2016; Nagase, 2018).

Despite such recent policy efforts to integrate women in the labor market, in my view it is not certain to what extent these initiatives lead to enhancement in gender equity in Japan. Most of the focus of womenomics has been centered on the economic growth by bringing women into the labor force rather than correcting gender equity in general (Maeda, 2018). Och and Hasunuma (2018) argue that the main driver for PM Abe's leadership of advancement in gender equality is economic pressure

[4] The Third Basic Plan for Gender Equality, which entails 30% numerical targets of women in leadership positions, was already approved by the DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan)'s leader, Kan Cabinet(Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office of Japan, n.d.) in December 2010.

and concern for Japan's international reputation. PM Abe has established his reputation as a conservative politician (Maeda, 2018), which may be not compatible with the idea of gender equity in male-dominant society. Conservative parties are seldom considered as promoters for gender equality. In fact, despite the policy statement of targeting 30% share of female in leadership positions, the target has not been achieved in PM Abe's cabinets. Moreover, female politicians tend to receive less important positions in the cabinets (Och & Hasunuma, 2018). Future empirical studies are needed in order to assess how Abe's womenomics policy has enhanced gender equity in general in Japan.

Promotion of interregional equity

Social equity initiatives and policy tend to focus on the areas that have greatest social disparities and aim at bringing greater benefits for those most disadvantaged (Wooldridge & Gooden, 2009). In the U.S. case, racial minorities such as African-Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians and Alaska natives have been considered as minorities and those most disadvantaged. Therefore, social equity research and policy tend to have centered on this dimension of social disparity. On the other hand, in the Japanese context, those who live in rural and remote areas (for example, citizens living outside of pacific side of Honshu island) tend to be considered "disadvantaged" and are beneficiaries of regional policies after the rapid economic growth period. Such benefits have been brought through various mechanisms, including interregional redistribution between urban and rural areas, national land development plans, public works and subsidies, and local revitalization programs (Abe & Alden, 1988; DeWit, 2002; DeWit & Steinmo, 2002; Fukui & Fukai, 1996; Han, 2010; Song, 2015).

Japan has a unitary political and administrative system rather than a federal system. Japan adopts a two-tier system; the prefecture as regional governmental unit and municipality as local. The latter are categorized as cities, towns, and villages. As of December 2018, Japan has 792 cities, 743 towns, and 183 villages, plus 23 special wards of Tokyo (MIC, 2018a). Japanese local governments have similar administrative structures regardless of their geographic location and municipal size. Although some municipalities have additional responsibilities depending on population size, basically all municipalities have the same powers and similar responsibilities such as provisions of social relief,

nursing insurance; national health insurance, etc (MIC, n.d.).[5] Average population size of all municipalities is 73,001, ranging from 0 to 3,724,844 in 2015. Four towns in Fukushima Prefecture record population of zero because of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011. Average population of city is 135,165 with 3,585 as the smallest city and 3,724,844 as the largest. Population of town ranges from zero to 51,053 with 13,656 as average population. Village population ranges from 18 to 39,504. Average village population is 4077.[6] Although one can see cultural and historical variations among Japan's regions, such differences are very small compared with countries with more diverse ethnic and linguistic differences.

Japan has four main islands, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, with more than 4,000 small islands (Abe & Alden, 1988). Japan's population and industrialization have concentrated on the pacific side of Honshu island (OECD, 2016b). Over-concentration of economic activities especially in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya metropolitan areas has been often regarded as problematic (Abe & Alden, 1988). In spite of such high-concentration and high-urbanization, Japan has a large number of mountainous terrain with a large amount of very small settlements. Those settlements usually have limited transportation access. In consequence, Japan has more population in remote rural regions (7% of the entire population) than in rural areas nearby cities (5%) (OECD, 2016b).

Japan is one of the few countries that has achieved high interregional equality since the 1970s. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2016a), Japan records the lowest regional disparities measured by the Gini index, an indicator of inequality in terms of GDP/capita, among OECD member countries. Income inequality among regions in Japan is remarkably low by OECD standards. Furthermore, there has been a reduction in inequality of GDP per capita income across Japanese regions between 1995 and 2010, while most other OECD member countries have experienced an increase in inequality (OECD, 2016b). Achievement of high regional equality has enabled Japanese central and local governments to provide high quality of public services

[5] Municipalities provide services which include social relief; the establishment and management of nursing homes for the elderly; elementary and middle schools; nursing insurance; national health insurance; urban design; construction and management of municipal roads, bridges, water, and sewerage; collection and disposal of general waste; fire-fighting operations; medical emergency support; and resident registration (MIC, n.d.).
[6] The author's calculation using MIC (2018b).

and infrastructure throughout the country without imposing heavy burdens of local taxes on citizens in rural and remote areas (DeWit, 2002; DeWit & Steinmo, 2002; OECD, 2005).

Regional disparity has not been a central topic of social inequity research in the U.S. as research tends to be centered on race, gender, economic status, sexuality, and disabilities (Wooldridge & Bilharz, 2017). Why has Japan considered people living in rural and remote areas as the disadvantaged thus targeted for protection by the government for equal benefits in Japan? Previous studies suggest several potential reasons for Japan's strong motivation for regional equality, including Japan's status as a late-development country, high regional disparities in the rapid economic growth period, lack of adequate social capital stock and infrastructure throughout the country, and electoral considerations of the ruling LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) (Abe & Alden, 1988; Fukui & Fukai, 1996; Han, 2010; Song, 2015). Analyzing reasons for such a strong emphasis on regional equality in Japanese politics and administration is outside scope of this chapter. However, the following two reasons are particularly interesting, and they are a topic that comparative social equity researchers should explore more fully in the future. One is the type of government system. One of the mechanisms employed for achieving high regional equality in Japan is its extensive interregional redistribution and equalization mechanism through the local allocation tax and national subsidies to local governments (DeWit, 2002; DeWit & Steinmo, 2002; OECD, 2005). According to DeWit and Steinmo (2002), unitary states such as Japan, as opposed to its Federal counterparts such as the U.S., tend to take a more aggressive stance in equalizing intergovernmental differences. Among developed countries, the degree of Japan's interregional redistribution and equalization schemes between urban and rural areas stand out (DeWit & Steinmo, 2002; OECD, 2005). Perhaps, such institutional-level differences may affect policy makers' strong motivation for interregional equality.

Another potential reason for Japan's emphasis on regional equality lies in its residential mobility rate. Compared to American residents, most Japanese do not frequently move. According to Schoppa (2012), rates of residential mobility in Japan are much lower than those in the U.S. While the mobility rate of American homeowners was 10.3 % in *the past fifteen months*, percentage of Japanese homeowners who moved is just 6.1 % within *the past five years* in 2000 (Schoppa, 2012). Mobility

rates among renters are also low in Japan. 36.4 % of renters moved in Japan within *the past five years*, while 38.8% of U.S. renters moved in *the past one year* (Schoppa, 2012). American families move often for numerous reasons, including job relocation or to find better neighborhoods and schools for their children; on the other hand, Japanese couples often build homes on family land which they are reluctant to leave (Schoppa, 2012). There are mainly two reasons for such low residential mobility in Japan (Schoppa, 2012). The first is a cultural reason. Japanese tend to feel strong attachment to ancestral lands where their family may have farmed for generations and where their ancestors are buried. Although its origins are uncertain, ancestor worship has always existed throughout the Japanese history in the context of major Japanese religious traditions such as Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Komuro, 2003). The other reason is the tight residential market. The secondhand home market in Japan is very small, and prices of used homes are usually very low. Because tax authorities consider older residential structures depreciating assets they are typically given low valuations. Thus, Japanese home owners have no strong incentive to sell their house for financial gain. Therefore, even when facing issues such as population decline, shrinking communities, and local government expenditure cuts, Japanese residents tend to exercise the "voice" option to improve their neighborhoods through civic action (Schoppa, 2012). My recent empirical study of Japanese municipal declines and volunteering shows that Japanese communities where their local governments conduct expenditure cuts tend to have active citizens' volunteer groups to compensate for declining government activity (Suzuki, 2017). Therefore, residents do not tend to move for better public services or stronger communities as shown in the model of "vote with your feet" (Schoppa, 2012). Given such a low mobility rate, it is natural for policy makers and politicians to improve and maintain certain levels of quality of public service throughout Japan and reduce service gaps.

In fact, in opposition to the image of more egalitarian country, income disparities before the Second World War between cities and villages were high because of differences in income between primary and non-primary sectors (Han, 2010; Nakamura, 1981). Equality among regions was not even an important item of the sociopolitical agenda at that time. However, land reforms and new tax scheme initiated by the U.S. Occupation contributed to a shift toward an orientation emphasizing

more equalization among policy makers and politicians (Han, 2010; Milly, 1999). In the post-war period, Japan suffered from a shortage of social capital stock and infrastructure such as roads, dams, and sewage systems from the 1950s through the 1980s throughout the country (Fukui & Fukai, 1996). In particular, the urban-rural income gap was a critical issue during the period of rapid economic growth (mid-1950s to 1973), which politicians and policy makers tried to address (Abe & Alden, 1988; Han, 2010).

There are several policy and political mechanisms that achieved such high regional equality since the 1960s, including an interregional redistribution scheme through transfers from the national government to financially weak local governments, national development plans and projects, public works and subsidies, and various local revitalization programs (Han, 2010). It is sufficient to say that these regional policies and schemes for addressing regional inequity explicitly aimed at reducing regional disparities. For instance, the Japanese government enacted the first Comprehensive National Development Plan (*Zenso*) in 1962. The development plan was made to compensate the National Income Doubling Plan (*Shotoku Baizo Keikaku*) released under the Ikeda Cabinet in 1960, which focused on industrial development mainly in the pacific belt zone, but not in other areas. The national development plan aimed at achieving regionally balanced development of the national land (Ito, 2003). Under the development plan, building of the *Shinkansen* (bullet train) network and highways were carried out to reduce regional inequity (Han, 2010). Comprehensive national development plans followed in 1969, 1977, 1987, 1998, and 2008. In fact, "reduction of regional disparities" and "balanced development of the national land" consistently appear as one of the primary policy goals in the five consecutive comprehensive national development plans adopted in 1962, 1969, 1977, 1987, and 1998 (Ito, 2003).

Recently, however, regional disparities seem to be widening. The words *kakusa* (disparity or inequality) and *chiiki kakusa* (regional disparities), have recently gained much popularity as Japan's shrinking regions and communities and rural depopulation have become critical issues in the 2000s (Chiavacci, 2010; Matanle, Rausch, & The Shrinking Regions Research Group, 2011; Song, 2015; Suzuki, 2017). Furthermore, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake has damaged municipalities in the

Tohoku regions and those affected municipalities now suffer from manpower shortages (Aoki, 2015, 2017a, 2017b), which may have negatively contributed to increasing regional gaps. There are several reasons for increasing regional inequity discussed by scholars. They include the financial crisis of 2007, declining and ageing population, excess concentration of population and industry in Tokyo, globalization, and political initiatives for neoliberal reforms by the Koizumi administration (Ataka, 2014; Chiavacci, 2010; Han, 2010; Song, 2015). Although the regional gap seems to be increasing, it should be noted that regional inequity in Japan is still very low by OECD standards (OECD, 2016a).

Strong interest in regional equality among Japanese public administrators and politicians has also been seen in discussions over the recent municipal merger reform. Municipal mergers have been carried out in many developed countries mainly for the purpose of increasing efficiency in the provision of municipal service and spending (Fox & Gurley-Calvez, 2006; OECD, 2014). After 1999, the central government in Japan has urged municipal consolidation. The Great Heisei Municipal Consolidation, as this effort is known, has in fact reduced the number of municipalities in Japan from 3,229 in 1999 to 1,821 in 2006 (Yokomichi, 2007); this number has continued to gradually decrease since, to 1,718 in 2014 (MIC, 2014).[7]

Municipal merger consolidates two or more municipalities to build larger and more efficient local governments by taking advantages of economy of scale (Suzuki, 2016). Thus, how to equalize levels of public services among multiple partner municipalities after their merger has been of central importance to public administrators and politicians. The quality of public services and the size of fees for citizens with respect to areas such as health care, medical care, public transportation, and other miscellaneous services commonly varied among neighboring municipalities. In discussions between local governments and citizens prior to merger, officials often promised that the new merged city would provide a level services commensurate with the better-serviced pre-merger municipality with the fees of the lower-fee pre-merger municipality (Takahashi, Uriu, & Matsumoto, 2016). In reality, however, the inequity of service provision continued after the merger, while fees were not as low as

[7] See Suzuki and Sakuwa (2016), Suzuki and Ha (2018), and Yamada (2016, 2018) for municipal merger in Japan.

promised. In particular, those former municipal entities which were absorbed into larger municipalities tend to experience declining service quality and other disadvantages from merger. Although the merged municipality has increased resources and administrative capacities, studies show that they are not equally distributed to all pre-merged jurisdictions (Hatakeyama, 2013; National Associations of Towns & Villages, 2008), resulting in intra-municipal inequalities. The new city center usually hosts human resources and capacities while peripheral communities within the merged municipality often lose administrative capacity. Formerly independent but now peripheral areas typically lose offices altogether or they are at least downgraded. These areas almost never remain unaffected in terms of administrative capacity by the merger. This in turn leads to decreased policy autonomy as well as downsizing in staff who are well-connected to peripheral area. Further, there is a decrease in contact with organizations and networks that formerly helped local leaders to learn about local residents' needs and wishes. This phenomenon in which administrative capacities move to the new city center has occurred in a number of cases, and the National Association of Towns and Villages (2008) has documented instances in which peripheral areas experience and depopulation and economic decline as a result of the relocation of city-center offices. Therefore, municipal merger reform has led to intra-municipal inequity, and this has become one of the primary concerns for local public administrators in merged cities. This suggests that public administrators and politicians still have strong concern for regional inequity.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at an overview of social inequity issues in Japan and how the Japanese government has approached inequity issues, highlighting regional inequity. Japan's case shows that regional disparities have been considered as one of the primary areas of focus with respect to inequity by the Japanese government. We need more empirical studies to know which areas of social equity that Japanese politicians and public administrators have weighted in the past few decades. However, it is clear that regional disparity has been one of the primary areas that the Japanese government has addressed and tried to solve. Japan's case suggests that focus areas of social equity will differ among countries. The interesting question to ask, especially from a perspective of

comparative public administration and management, is to examine what factors affect how priority areas are determined in social equity policy. Social equity tends to focus on the areas with significant social disparities which, rightly, tend to be prioritized. However, in addition to the level of inequity, what other contextual factors affect policy makers' decisions for prioritizing areas of social equity? How do factors such as levels of democracy, levels of gender representation, characteristics of bureaucracy, and political leadership affect such decisions?

Japan's case also suggests other interesting research questions. One such question is to investigate who is the primary driver of social equity policy. Do social equity initiatives tend to be taken by political actors or public administrators? In the case of Japan, political initiatives seem to have played a critical role in promoting regional equality (Chiavacci, 2010; Han, 2010; Song, 2015). However, given the strong roles and influence of bureaucracy in Japan's policy making (Aoki, 2018), such long-term policy emphasis on how to achieve regional equality could not have been pursued, if Japanese bureaucrats had not continually supported such political initiatives. Another interesting question to ask is what are the intermunicipal differences in motivation for addressing social equity. Some municipalities are eager to address and solve inequity issues such as intramunicipal service inequity, while others appear to have little interest in addressing inequity. Investigating driving forces for such intermunicipal motivational differences is also another potential research question.

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