

**Proceedings of the Public Lecture**  
**“Policy Practice in Japan: The Role of Action Research”**  
**by Dr. Naoki Suzuki of Seisen University**

**Thursday, 29 December 2005, 9:00 AM – 12:00 PM.**  
**Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok**

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Dr. Naoki Suzuki’s public lecture entitled “Policy Practice in Japan: Role of Action Research” used personal field experience to challenge the standard philosophical orientation used by public policy research practitioners. From the four typologies identified; positivism, hermeneutics, critical, and post-modernism; positivism is regarded to be the most common when conducting public policy research. The objective of Suzuki’s personal research and the topic of discussion integrated the possibility of research done at the critical level.

By positivism, the method most often utilized in public policy research, the researcher is in fact merely an onlooker of a society accumulating a one-way stream of knowledge. The observatory nature of positivism allows the research to be value-free for the researcher. The term ‘value-free’ infers the absence of personal connectedness between the researcher and the subject/society of research. Positivism aims to discover social laws that are universal no matter who is responsible for conducting the research.

Hermeneutics, also known as ‘Interpretive Orientation’, requires more dialogue between the researcher and society. Through interactive dialogue, the researcher seeks a greater understanding or enlightenment of the society in research. Due to the give and take nature of a discussion, the outcomes found from one researcher to the next will inevitably be different.

Unlike positivism and hermeneutics, the third research approach, the critical or normative approach, is not value-free. In the critical approach, the researcher is directly involved in the issue at hand in attempts to seek social justice. This involvement requires commitment on the part of the researcher, thus connecting him or her to the society.

The final philosophical orientation, post-modern or relativistic approach, attempts to construct local narratives. This construction process requires to first *deconstruct* existing local narratives before reconstructing new ones.

After identifying the four possible research methodologies, Suzuki asked the question, “In the name of ‘public interest’ can knowledge for public policy development be generated at the expense of exploiting affected people?” It can be understood that ‘knowledge exploitation’ is extracting information to achieve either a goal external to those comprising the societal body under study.

Before taking the audience through his own use of the critical approach on the island of Ishagaki in Japan, Suzuki discusses the similarities between researchers and NGOs and to whom they are respectively accountable. Unlike the market or government where the money-goods/services exchange is two-way, the money flow from funding agencies or donors to the beneficiaries or objective of the research is one way. Both the donors to NGOs and the agencies supporting researchers essentially gain little to nothing for providing the necessary funding to complete the project or research.

Researchers and NGOs both find themselves between a rock and a hard place: should they be accountable to those responsible for providing funds or to those communities being effected by the funding? If the researcher/NGO fails to comply with the demands/objectives set forth by the source of funding, the funds will cease to exist. However, if the researcher/NGO fails to do what is favorable for the research objective/beneficiaries of the project problems at the ground level will arise.

Dr. Suzuki gives life to the philosophical orientations of research methodology through personal experience with an organization he gives the pseudonym IDREI (International Development Research and Education Institute) . The overall objective of IDREI is to conduct training for a new generation of Japanese development professionals and to conduct research on international development. The four primary activities include training, research activities, supporting graduate schools, and network building.

Although IDREI is not a governmental organization per se, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MOE) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) support it financially. IDREI is composed of two divisions, research and project, each headed by a director. Suzuki was a researcher working for the research division, under the supervision of the research division director. Dr. Suzuki was appointed head of a research project entitled “Marginalization and NGOs”.

MOFA allocated a three-year budget for IDREI to conduct research to determine how Japanese NGOs are dealing with the issues of globalization and marginalization. It is crucial to understand the reluctance on the part of Japanese NGOs to work within the domain of governmental bodies in order to understand first the significance of the project and second, the significance of Suzuki selected as the Project Director.

The project aimed to build networks within the NGO community as well as enable the government to project the image as a ‘friend’ or partner to NGOs. Due to the already internalized distaste NGOs had towards working with the government, Suzuki’s past work in the NGO sectors made him the most suitable candidate to break the pre-existing barriers.

The initial year of the project aimed at building trust and relationships among the practitioners. Suzuki formed an NGO study group that provided an environment for sharing experiences.

By the end of the first year, the group members decided without prompting by Suzuki, it was time to produce something tangible or dismantle the group. Collectively, the group members chose Ishigaki, an island of the Okinawa Prefecture. The nature of the resort island creates a dichotomy between environmentalists interested in preservation and developers interested in tourist infrastructure to create revenue.

Development challenges, such as access to education and health care, on the island with 50,000 inhabitants made Ishigaki an acceptable choice for the study group to conduct a project. The data would be gathered using the interpretive or hermeneutics approach. Although IDREI and MOFA were not fully satisfied by the research proposal, they dared not stop Suzuki for fear of upsetting the NGOs, whose rapprochement MOFA primarily approved.

At the outset, the residents of Ishigaki were extremely skeptical to Suzuki and the other practitioners. The Ishigaki people saw the group as an organization with the intent of conducting 'knowledge exploitation'. Upon arrival on the island, Suzuki was told by hostile locals to leave the island.

The unwilling nature of the locals created a dilemma for Dr. Suzuki and the NGO practitioners. On the one hand, IDREI did not take much interest of the research; it was Suzuki who did not want to lose face in front of his NGO friends, if he refused to engage with the Ishigakians. Yet, the people's refusal to participate just for the benefit of the researchers caused a conflict of interests.

In order to solve the crisis, Suzuki inquired what he could do for the people of Ishigaki. The local leader suggested he create a forum to foster mutual understanding among the community, practitioners and environmentalists. This suggestion, which lie somewhere between the interpretive and the normative approach, had drastic effects shifting the relationship between Suzuki and the people from negative to positive.

The new approach satisfied the needs and desires of both the NGO practitioners and the people of Ishigaki. The mental model of the average NGO practitioner is one of action at the local level, thus the forum at Ishigaki provided a workable venue. The residents of Ishigaki saw the forum as a means for not only publicizing their problems but also an opportunity to conduct their own activities.

The evolution of the Ishigaki Forum and the transition from interpretive to normative research caused hesitancy from MOFA. The primary funding organization subconsciously compartmentalized IDREI as its own pseudo-think tank, thus a forum with no direct benefit towards this aim seemed ill productive. MOFA wanted research, not a project. Ishigaki was also a domestic issue, while MOFA and IDREI's missions were international affairs. To align the forum with its own objectives, MOFA suggested it become part of the Kyushu Okinawa Summit.

The NGO and local stakeholders, however, did not comply with joining the Kyushu Okinawa Summit. The inconsistency between the interests of the funding agency and the beneficiaries created a difficult situation for Suzuki, as he attempted to maintain one foot in the government world and one foot in the 'real' world.

Despite not joining the Kyushu Okinawa Summit, the forum went on as previously planned. The forum resulted in many unforeseen outputs. To begin, the forum assisted 'outsiders' in learning how to approach issues in the field. In addition, relationships between NGO participants were formed for the first time. Neither of these unforeseen outcomes would have been conceived through the positivism approach of research. Finally, the forum and the normative approach to action research gained the much needed trust of the initially reluctant Ishigaki people. Overall, in this instance, action research proved to lead to many positive unexpected results.

How applicable are the experiences of Suzuki and the IDREI project in Ishigaki for future researchers? In retrospect, it is evident the use of action research was not premeditated. Rather, action research developed because the research could not be conducted through any other means. The government policy makers, the funding agencies remaining skepticism of the practices of action research is an additional inhibiting factor a researcher must consider. Suzuki confessed that he had to pay a personal price for conducting an action-research project without the full support and approval of his supervisors.

Suzuki concluded his presentation by asking the audience three questions: 1) Is the participation of many stakeholders a good idea for the study of policy development? 2) How to make the best use of the multidimensional output of action-research? 3) How can we encourage policy makers in government to participate in action-research?

To conclude, Suzuki recognizes the difficulty and unpredictable nature of action research. The number of actors needed to be substantially involved with respective conflicting interests will inexorably create tension, leaving the researcher in a difficult position as a mediator. Balancing accountability between the various stakeholders in itself will become a demanding task. Lastly, pin pointing the actual contribution to tangible changes in public policy remains vague. More significantly, action research plays the crucial role in the ongoing evolution of the 'culture' and thought process of policy makers and researchers. Action research's ability to assist in this shift in mindsets is part of the long road of policy change.