



OPINION

Viewpoint: Emi Kiyota

# Loneliness Cannot be Solved with Accessible Ramps



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The elderly are a marginalised group in many cities. **Dr Emi Kiyota** argues that over-reliance on government help increases the sense of isolation and helplessness in the elderly. She believes instead that civil society is best placed to provide the social infrastructure needed to integrate the elderly, an approach that can apply to other groups as well. Dr Kiyota is the founder of the not-for-profit organisation *Ibasho*, which works to create sustainable communities that value their elders.

Issues such as integration are both a political and a community issue. Most of the time, we focus on physical infrastructure, but infrastructure can also be social in nature, and we have not invested enough in that. This is where civil society can play a key role.

For example, we currently have physical infrastructure like elevators or institutional care like adult day care for the elderly. The government should provide the physical infrastructure, because this is something the community cannot provide by themselves. But in some cities, ageing hits before the economy can grow, and so some governments may not have the resources. Long-term institutional care is also not possible financially because it is so expensive.

More importantly, by focusing on providing care or physical infrastructure for the elderly, we lead the elderly to feel even more dependent on others. People also begin to expect the government to provide for everyone, but each person should take the initiative to be independent and create their own community—this is something that the government cannot do. A lot of the elderly say: “I’m lonely, the government will have to do something.” This is not the government’s role—loneliness cannot be solved with accessible ramps. Moreover, this attitude perpetuates the stigma that the elderly are a burden and cannot contribute to society.

Current eldercare is also very healthcare-related and “top-down,” with younger professionals telling elders what to do and treating them like broken human beings. The reality is that the elderly do not like this, so we are basically providing expensive care that nobody appreciates. This is horrible from a government’s point of view.

The elderly know their own issues and challenges best—we should be seeking their input, or even engaging them as experts, to provide them with the care they need. This also shows them how they can play a part in taking care of themselves.

In some Asian countries, villagers may be poor but they are much happier, especially the older people, because they are well respected. They have a very strong sense of community and role in society for the elderly. As they have lower expectations of the government, they are also more self-organised. So this is something that we can learn.

Disability is not just due to an inability to do something; it is also determined by our physical environment and social norms. To integrate the elderly—and other marginalised groups—social perceptions must change.

Civil society can play a significant role in educating people on this. At Ibasho, we seek to integrate the elderly into the community by empowering them. Older people tend to be satisfied with receiving their pension and

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relying on their children. So we encourage the elderly to want to do more in society, and show them how they can be role models. We give them concrete examples, because it is hard for them to imagine anything else—they have been conditioned to believe that they are helpless.

It is very important that a third party such as civil society does this. It is tricky if the government promotes empowerment, because some think “the government has money, and has done this before, so they should do more,” and do not feel they have to work on it.

Civil society can also bring in the participation of the people. I like to challenge people about “PPP” (public-private partnerships). It should be “PPPP”, with “people” in the equation. I also like to encourage developers and the government to leave spaces in developments for the community to be creative. Design will always become obsolete, but with a space where people can change things, their needs will always be met. This also enables the elderly to actively come up with solutions.

I started Ibasho by applying my previous practical experience in nursing home and hospital design. We work with the government to provide more care and services, and help identify opportunities where the elderly can

be better engaged to meet their psychosocial needs. We also work with the community so they can create their own support systems, and help them realise that caregiving for one’s parents can be a positive experience, not a burden.

The key contribution of civil society in integrating the elderly is not in constructing buildings, but in changing social perceptions. Seeing elders as assets is a principle that can be applied anywhere. Yet, how we use the wisdom and experience of elders differs from place to place, because each has different skills and talents. It starts with pilot projects, research, training the elders and wider community, and creating toolkits for them to spread the concepts. That is the role of civil society. We can be very effective in leading small projects; the local community will then scale up. This is what is happening for our projects in the Philippines and Nepal.

Similarly, this can be applied to all who tend to be marginalised: people with disabilities, minority groups or refugees. Civil society can help set up completely different types of “Ibasho” throughout the world for all groups of people. They just need to be centred on a core belief—that each group can be an asset to the community. ●