
From segregation to participation: connecting sheltered workshops and local communities in Japan

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Résumé

In Japan, sheltered workshops have emerged after World War II, as part of the rehabilitation measures aimed at reintegrating wounded veterans into society. As time went by, their "reintegration" goal has been progressively left aside and they have become special institutions offering little perspectives of access to mainstream employment. They still exist today. Yet, along with recent development of policies aimed at fostering disabled workers' involvement in the mainstream labor market, they have undergone significant changes since the beginning of the 21st century. There are two different categories of sheltered workshop. Category-A workshops are meant as training places, from which disabled workers can gain professional experience before eventually joining a mainstream workplace. On the other hand, category-B workshops function as special institutions offering very low wages and no perspective of further integration into the labor market. Yet both categories of workshops often operate together, holding strong financial connections and sometimes exchanging workers. Moreover, even category-B workshops sometimes play a role in the local economy and foster the integration of their workers in the local community. This paper is based on a fieldwork conducted in Japan in 2018-2019. It analyzes the various practices developed in sheltered workshops in Tokyo and Kyoto and investigate how and to what extent sheltered workshops try to overcome the segregation principle they are based on and to bridge the gap between disabled workers and local society. It shows that current practices tend to emphasize the need to strengthen the links between sheltered workshops and local communities. Yet these links are often based on the fact that sheltered workshop provides a low-cost labor force, a situation that at the same time foster disabled workers' contribution to the local economy and reinforce social inequalities.

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