

Sendai, Finland Pushing Well-being Project

By Kazuo ENDO

The City of Sendai is pressing ahead with a “Sendai-Finland Well-being Center” project in collaboration with the North European republic. The scheme is geared to fuse the Finnish type of welfare with that of Japan, produce new equipment and services in the health and welfare industry field by utilizing information and communications technology (ICT), invigorate the regional economy, and maintain and enhance the quality of life (QOL) of residents centering on the elderly.

Overview of Project

IN 2000, Finland inquired of local Japanese governments about a possible corporate partner in the area of health and welfare. Out of about 30 candidates, Finland selected the City of Sendai as its partner to undertake the project. Negotiations began between Sendai and Finland in the summer of 2001 and the project formally started after nine relevant organizations signed a “cooperation agreement” in November 2003.

With Sendai serving as a coordinator, Tohoku Fukushi University, Tohoku University, Tohoku Fukushi Corporation and the Development Bank of Japan signed the accord for the Japanese side. Signing for the Finnish side were the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES), the Finnish Institute in Japan and the Oulu Region Centre of Expertise, with Finnish trade bureau Finpro acting as a coordinator.

The goal of the project is to develop health and welfare equipment and services, and make them available to people so that they will remain healthy and live safely and worry-free at home even when they become old. It trains its sights on offering services “now, here and to me alone,” which will be a step ahead of “any time, any place and for any one” seen in a ubiquitous environment under ICT. Concretely, health exercise programs and equipment designed to ascertain physical and living conditions of middle-aged to elderly people will be developed, among other things, based on verified scientific grounds. Such programs and equipment, combined with wireless technology and sensors, will be

customized to meet the needs of individuals.

The center, which opened in March 2005, consists of the R&D Unit established and managed by the Sendai City Industrial Promotion Organization, an affiliate body of the city, and the Care Unit set up and operated by Tohoku Fukushi Corporation. By having the two facilities built on the same site, it has become possible for developers and users to try to maintain close liaison for the development of higher-quality equipment and services more quickly than before.

Business development directors from both the Sendai and Finnish sides are posted on a full-time basis at the R&D Unit that is functioning as a business incubator facility. In addition to assisting tenant businesses, they also help match companies, back up joint corporate R&D and hold workshops. The Care Unit was built to a design that took in a Finnish welfare concept. It has been performing not only as a nursing care facility but also as a regional center offering a setting for the practice of a new form of health promotion, nursing care and welfare.

When the Sendai-Finland Well-being Center project got under way in November 2003, the number of participating organizations was fewer than 20. As of March 2008, about 40 Finnish and about 70 Japanese organizations were utilizing a platform provided by the center, forming a network. Thus far, there have been 25 cases of international cooperation among corporations and seven among universities on a contract basis. Cases of equipment and services offered to the market numbered eight while about 20 R&D projects are under way.

International & Regional Cooperation

There are broadly three distinctive features in the project.

The first characteristic is that a local government – the Sendai municipality – took the initiative in carrying out negotiations independently with an overseas government (the Finnish government) to get the project started. From 2001, when individual talks began, to February 2002, when the announcement was made on the construction of the center, Sendai municipality officials held discussions directly with their Finnish counterparts, reached a basic agreement and decided on a framework of the project. Their stance was based on the idea that “when local officials plan and take action, the central government backs them up.” This philosophy conformed perfectly with the idea of those in the central government at the time and subsequently led to a variety of support from the state.

The second feature is cooperation between a regional public body (the City of Sendai) and the state. Previously, almost all international cooperation involving Japan had been concluded either between nations or between cities. However, the agreement concerning the Sendai-Finland Well-being Center represents the combination of a city and a nation, in which the local government may carry an element of risk in conducting “diplomacy” but also may expand the possibility of the city’s international cooperation and contribute to its reputation as a successful city in the international community. Relevant administrative officials, academics and those in the business world from more than 10 countries, including



Source : Sendai City Office

France, Germany and Singapore, have visited the center to learn about the background of the project.

The third characteristic is cooperation among industry, academia and "citizens" in the region. It is assumed that a new prime mover in society, particularly the driving force in industry, is in the "academic" field. "Industry" delivers seeds of the prime mover to society, but they should reflect the needs of "citizens" who are their users. With respect to the welfare project, its developers (industry and academia) were in proximity to its users (citizens), shared information on

the seeds and needs from the initial stage of development, and designed equipment and services of still better quality.

Autonomy & Development of City

As globalization progresses, the city cannot hope for further development unless it takes into consideration its positioning not only in Japan but also in the world and carries out its regional management spontaneously and actively. In this sense, the Sendai-Finland Well-being Center is a pilot project that may indicate a direction for the city's inde-

pendence and growth.

We will wrestle with further development of the project with an eye toward making it the hub of the global health and welfare industry, while seeking improvement in the quality of life of regional residents and invigoration of the regional economy.

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