

The Challenge of Local Community Building

By Hamano Takayoshi

For some years now there has been much talk in Japan about the "age of the regions," and "decentralization" has become a ubiquitous buzzword. In practice, however, the centralized administrative system since the Meiji period (1867-1912) has become firmly entrenched, and reversing the trends toward concentration in Tokyo and depopulation in the regions is no easy matter.

Nevertheless, despite the obstacles, there are examples of citizens in the regions who pool their wisdom and join hands to make constant and relentless efforts toward local community building.

One of the groups that supports such activities is the Society for Creating Tomorrow's Japan, a nonprofit organization. With the support of the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and others, this society operates an annual project in which it awards entities that are active and have achieved results in building attractive local communities that are strikingly individualistic and brimming with vitality. In fiscal 1998 the project, which was being held for the thirteenth time, attracted 133 applications from around the country. Of them, 11 applicants received prizes, which were awarded in late November. Six awards went to the organization division (which accounted for 80% of applications), three to municipalities, and two to individuals. Award recipients have to display some kind of creativity and originality and be rich in ideas. Here are a few of the most outstanding examples.

Welfare Activities in a City Center

While most applicants are engaged in



Children serving meals to the elderly at a nursing home in Kasuga, Kyoto

activities in the regions to enliven their villages or towns, the prime minister's award in the organization division this time went to a group in central Kyoto that conducts welfare activities. Based in an elementary school district, the Kasuga Residents' Welfare Council implements carefully planned welfare and disaster-prevention activities and has as many as 2,460 members. The council, which has been active for more than 20 years, has prepared a welfare and disaster-prevention map that has not only the names of individual households but also information related to welfare and disaster prevention. Its activities include visits to bedridden elderly people by volunteers, meal services, nighttime welfare patrols, exchanges between the elderly and children, the publication of a monthly newsletter, *Kasuga Tayori*, and "silver disaster-prevention squads" formed by elderly people.

In city centers, it is not unusual for people not to know their neighbors. In Kasuga, the residents were brought together and roused to action by an incident about 20 years ago, just when the problem of the elderly was coming to the fore and they were beginning to move in "know thy neighbors" direction. At that

time, one elderly person caused a fire with a cigarette in bed and died in the flames. The Kasuga school district had a tradition of solidarity among its residents. In 1869, before the central government had introduced a system of compulsory education, the residents had joined forces to create an elementary school. The death-by-fire incident would have been unthinkable in the district in the past. So the residents, believing that such incidents should be prevented, discussed the situation seriously and

heightened their awareness of the need for welfare activities. One of the reasons why the council has continued to operate for such a long time is perhaps the variety of its activities, with all kinds of ideas being put forth.

Japanese-Style *Kleiner Garten*

The prime minister's award in the municipality division went to Shigamura village in the middle of Nagano Prefecture, about three hours from Tokyo. This village has created 53 citizens' farm plots, modeled on the German accommodation-type *Kleiner Garten*, using idle mulberry fields and has been successful in building a forum for exchange between urban and rural cultures. Previously this village was troubled by advancing depopulation, but visitors were always impressed by its beautiful natural environment and its openness compared with other mountain villages. The idea of creating small farm plots came from the head of the village after he visited Germany and saw the *Kleiner Garten* there.

When the law for the promotion of citizens' farms was enacted in 1990 to encourage the use of idle farmland, Shigamura village quickly set about



Children learning how to make buckwheat noodles at Kleiner Garten

Cleaning Rivers

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of local community building activities that begin with local environmental problems. In the organization division, the chief cabinet secretary's award went to the Society for Protecting Shinmachigawa in Tokushima city, which began efforts to vitalize the community by cleaning up the local rivers.

Tokushima city has 138 rivers, large and small, which for a long time had been made filthy by household waste water and garbage. About eight years ago a group of 10 people who could no longer turn a blind eye to the dirtiness of the rivers set about cleaning them up, tackling the task twice a month with four boats and nets. They put special efforts into tidying up the rivers that enclose the city center in a kind of gourd shape. Moved to action by the rivers' cleanliness, the prefecture and city built a waterside park. Various events are also held by the now dirt-free waters, including performances of ceremonial court music and a "Santa comes from the river" festival. In addition, the group began to operate an excursion boat on the river, giving people 20-minute rides to enjoy the riverside scenery and river breeze. Since the aim of the service is to increase people's awareness of the need to keep the rivers clean, there is no charge for the ride. At first the excursion boat was operated only on alternate weekends, but now, under consignment from the city, volunteers offer rides every weekend. This excursion boat has been so effective in raising people's awareness of the rivers that in the summer as many as 50,000 citizens joined in a campaign to clean up the large Yoshinogawa River.

Impetus for Action

The chief cabinet secretary's award in the municipality division went to the town of Gokashocho in Shiga Prefecture, the hometown in the past of the Omi merchants, who used to peddle their wares around the country using long poles that they carried over their shoulders. This town set about revitalizing itself by turning the whole community into a nature museum to display its natural and historical heritage. As a result, the whole



Kleiner Garten in Shigamura, Nagano Prefecture

community has joined in the activity, with residents taking the initiative to preserve old merchants' houses and introduce the local culture to visitors.

These are four examples of successful local community building. The impetus for such activities is varied. Among applicants in the organization division, the most common activities involved resource recycling and environmental preservation, followed by the promotion of local industries and events and then the promotion of local culture and community sports. Other activities involved community development and improvement of the living environment, the healthy upbringing of youngsters, the aging society and welfare, and internationalization of the local community and international exchange. That is to say, the material for local community building exists everywhere and anywhere; the community does not have to have any special characteristics, such as a distinctive historical heritage. The problem is how to utilize the theme and how to expand the circle of activities. It is here that originality and creativity are required.

In order to bring about a real "age of the regions," discussions are taking place on how to reform local administrative and fiscal systems. But at the same time, as well as this framework, it is becoming increasingly important for local citizens in the regions themselves to have the enthusiasm to build pleasant and lively communities. **UJI**

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creating small citizens' farms with cabins (*Laube*) equipped with showers and sleeping facilities on plots measuring 300 square meters each. The village advertised the first 21 plots in 1994. Use of the plots was for five years, to be extended automatically, at an annual fee of ¥350,000, including membership dues for the Kleiner Garten Club. Applicants outnumbered the available plots by three times, so the successful ones had to be chosen by lottery.

At present users come from not only Tokyo but also as far away as Kochi Prefecture and Okinawa. For each plot, one farming household acts as a "relative" for one user, helping them to grow vegetables by organic methods and cultivate flowers. Once a month there is some kind of exchange activity, such as a "cool-evening party" in summer, a harvest festival, or a talk on organic farming. Sometimes, it is said, the urban holiday farmers grow seedlings even better than the locals.

In order to protect its abundant nature, Shigamura aims not simply at vitalization but also at becoming a real "ecovillage." Accordingly, it asks the users to take their noncombustible garbage back with them, and the users never complain.

Since the village receives a subsidy from the government for this project and also collects fees from the users, its fiscal burden is not very heavy. In that sense, the project has been praised as an activity that "makes something out of nothing," and other villages apparently have plans to introduce similar activities.