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Challenges of a Resident Non Profit Organization in Rural Japan

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the activity of a certain resident non-profit organization 'Yuki-Daruma Club' and examine a new movement of Japan's regional policy. This club in a valley of Mt. Hakusan is active without depending on the city government as much as possible. Their activity won many prizes and it was tied to the improvement of the evaluation of the government. They enjoys independence from the administrative office are involved in a 'win-win' situation. I think that it takes a long time so that such a new movement spreads out in Japan. However we have to do deeper consideration about the background of such a change. One local government employee has pointed out the elements required for a successful local regional policy. He said that local government should respect the activity plans of resident organizations, and assist them. In addition, he emphasizes that local employees should make it clear that these organizations. In Japan, the public-private relationship is entering a new era. It's necessary for local governments to create an environment where it's easy for resident organizations to propose various plans and ideas.

I . Introduction

Under the mantra of 'catching up and overtaking' the West, Japan has followed a path of economic development, with regional diversity considered less of a priority. The current affluent lifestyles of the Japanese people can be attributed to this policy. Japan's local governments, however, have forgotten that 'regions are created through their own efforts'. It seems these local governments have, in exchange for affluence, forgotten their origins.

After the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake Disaster, there has been a tendency to criticize government-led regional policy (Ra, 2008; Ra, 2010). The mainstream opinion now is that the private sector, and not only the public sector, should also take the lead role in regional stimulation, with public-private partnerships (PPPs) attracting particular attention (Kodaki, 2007; Hidaka, 2008). So, Hatoyama Cabinet reviewed the Japanese traditional "*Kokyo* (Public Commons)" and declared to promote "*Atarashii-Kokyo* (the New Public Commons)" ¹⁾ in June 2010.

In this paper I will examine some challenges of a certain resident organization in rural Japan, and will indicate ways in which the relationship between the private sector, the resident non-profit organization and local government is changing.

II. Issues with Government-led Regional Policy in rural Japan

Why are PPPs attracting attention? There are three underlying reasons: Firstly, regional policies implemented by local government officials with no experience of working at private corporations have been proved to be unsuccessful. Local government employment in Japan operates on the principles of lifetime employment and seniority by length of service. Under the Japanese system, capable young workers cannot be promoted over older colleagues, and the system is skewed in favor of generalists rather than specialists. Despite the fact that the modern global economy demands a high level of economic sense, under this system local government cannot make the most of those kinds of human resources.

Secondly, local government officials tend not to come up with innovative ideas. One national bureaucrat has noted that local officials are mainly concerned with the intentions of their superiors or the national government, and tend to wait for guidance from them. It is also said that they focus on how things have been done in the past, are reluctant to try new things, and don't want to adopt a policy that's different to other regions (Hirano and Kohno, 2003). This behavioral pattern arises from the fact that they are scared of failure and want to avoid taking responsibility. It is difficult for innovative regional policies to be created with this mentality.

Finally, because regional financing in Japan is overly reliant on central government, residents do not understand local government sufficiently. According to one company executive, the reason local authorities do not have distinct, specialized regional policies is because central government hands out large subsidies to regions. This person also insisted that a 'menu' of regional policies provided by central government makes it difficult for private sector ideas to be developed.

When it comes to creating regional policies, the important point is to demand amenities after understanding the strength of one's own regional government. In the past, maintenance of essential utilities was an important issue in Japan. Now that it has become a developed nation, however, the important regional policy areas in Japan, especially urban area, are welfare, the environment, education, and so on (Yabuno, 2005). This is a key period for Japan in terms of adding value to regions using local policies.

In rural Japan, concepts discarded by those who live in cities, such as 'traditional culture' and 'community', still remain. Making the most of these attributes requires more than just the hard work of local government. Local residents must also take notice of and participate in regional policy. Because Japan worked so hard in trying to catch up with the West, pride in local traditional

culture and nature has been lost. Many people have moved to the cities in search of job, and the societies that bind regions together have been destroyed.

It's now time for Japanese local governments to reconsider the homogenous regional policies created by the public sector and create regional policies that honor local diversity.

III. Case Study: *Yuki-Daruma* Club

In this part, I will examine one case of local residents getting involved with regional policy planning. My case study will be Hakusan City's '*Yuki-Daruma* (Snowman) Club' resident non-profit organization²⁾ (Figure 1). Their activities over the last 20 years have attracted praise from several organizations, and they have been awarded many prizes (Table 1).

Yuki-Daruma Club is involved with three main activities. The first of these is '*Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* (Snowman Festival)', where many residents come together to build snowmen. *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* takes place every February, and provides increased opportunities for interaction and socializing among local residents. Secondly, they run 'the *Yuki-Daruma* Café Project', which



<Figure 1> Location Map

<Table 1> *Yuki-Daruma* Club's Prize Record

year	record
1999	Local Activation Center, Special Prize
2005	Ishikawa TV, Special Prize
2006	Suntory Cultural Foundation, Regional Culture Prize
2007	Ishikawa Chiiki-Dukuri Award
2008	Commendation from Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport
2008	Commendation from Minister of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications

Data Source: *Yuki-Daruma* Club

has its base of operations in a traditional Japanese house '*Kyu Katoh-Ke*'. The aim of this project is to protect traditional local culture while providing a place for tourists to take a break. Finally, they provide information about their activities and provide education for the next generation of local residents.

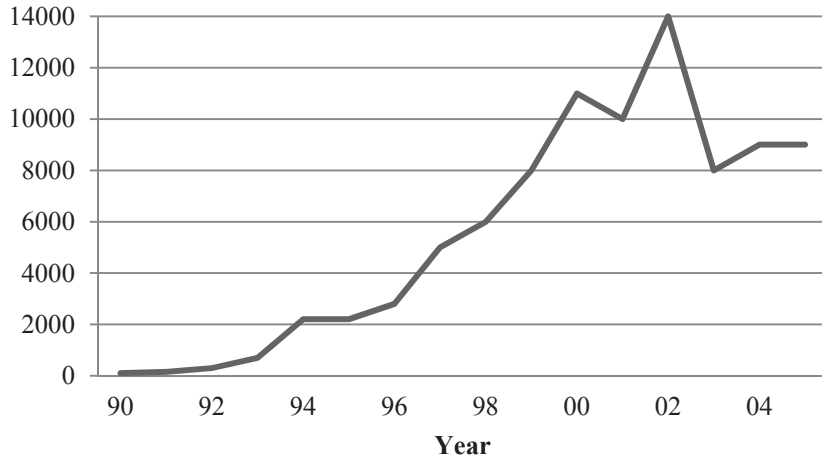
1. *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* (Snowman Festival): An Outline

Yuki-Daruma Matsuri was the starting point for *Yuki-Daruma* Club's activities. Both local residents and tourists who came for the snow take part in the event. The festival takes place in a small community, Shiramine area, in the foot of Mt. Hakusan.

At first, it was a very small event, attended only by locals, but the number of tourists has increased since the late 90s. In recent years as many as 10,000 people have attended the festival annually (Figure 2).

Yuki-Daruma Matsuri was started because the local government's plans for regional development through facility construction had come to a dead end. They had tried to attract winter sports fans by constructing a ski facility, but as the number of domestic skiers in Japan decreased, so did the tourism revenue to the region. The forestry industry was also in decline, and more and more young people were leaving for the cities. The area was losing its vitality. This festival was started by a number of young people as an attempt to buck this trend. Their thinking was 'We've got an abundance of snow here in winter. Can't we use it in a way that lets everyone have fun together?' They therefore established the resident organization that was the basis of *Yuki-Daruma* Club, and made regional development a reality.

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Data Source: *Yuki-Daruma* Club

<Figure 2> Participants of *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri*

Yuki-Daruma Matsuri is a very simple concept. Each resident builds one or more snowmen, then, in the evening, all the snowmen are lit up simultaneously using candles. A 1,100-strong army of residents build more than 2,500 snowmen between them. An extremely beautiful, fantastical scene is created. A photography exhibition is also part of the event, allowing local people and tourists to see photos of the snowmen (Figure 3).

Many types of snowmen are built for the festival, and there are several different building



Data Source: *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* Jikko-linkai (2008)

<Figure 3> A Work in *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri*

methods. Some snowmen are carved from snow walls erected in the small village where the festival takes place. A snow wall is created in the *Kamakura* style, and a small snowman image is then gouged out of it. Some of the snowmen are evocative of traditional culture; others are based on anime characters or Chinese zodiac animals. One of the characteristics of this event is that it is not just local residents who build snowmen – tourists do so as well. Local university students also volunteer to help with the building of the snowmen.

As a result, *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* has a traditional, cultural feel, while also increasingly becoming a place where locals and tourists can interact and communicate with each other. The festival's tagline is "Rather than the splendor that will be forgotten tomorrow, let's experience a simple beauty that will remain in our hearts forever" . For these reasons, *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* is continuing to thrive without requiring any large-scale marketing campaigns.

Mr. Hiromasa Yamashita³⁾ , who is one of the charter members of *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri*, offers the following reasons as an analysis of why the festival is so highly regarded:

- The simplicity of the festival content.
- The cooperation of local residents.
- The fact that it reflects the snowy region's unique characteristics.
- The festival's post-materialistic values.
- The low level of reliance on local government.
- The festival resonates with the sensibility of children.

The point he makes about the 'low level of reliance on local government' in his analysis is an important one. Although anyone can build a snowman, every snowman has its own individual characteristics – no two snowmen are the same. All snowmen share a common raw material, but when it comes to their shape or construction, there is boundless diversity. In this sense, building snowmen can be considered as a metaphor for creating regional policies. Regional policies can also be constructed in a variety of ways, according to local characteristics, and selecting which approach will be used is something that is entrusted to people living locally.

Another characteristic of *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* is the way it creates family bonds by encouraging families to build snowmen together. It also gives people opportunities to speak to their neighbors, and nurtures an environment in which local residents cooperate with each other. Additionally, clearing the snow after the snowmen have been built is an opportunity to bridge the gap between young and old and bring them closer together. Furthermore, another distinctive point of this event is that local residents share the enjoyment with visitors.

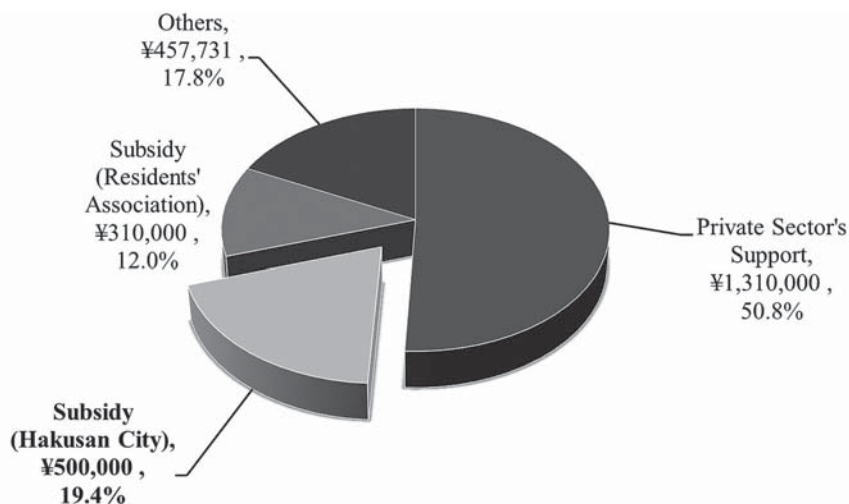
It could be said that this festival, which even requires traffic control for tourists (the number of tourists is ten times that of the local population), is aiming to be a "local festival, by the locals, for the locals" .

2. Local Government's Role in *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri*

Mr. Yamashita says that *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* was intended to be an event that relied as little as possible on local government. Some of the citizen-led resident organizations that try to stimulate local life completely reject any involvement with local government, but *Yuki-Daruma Club* does feel that some cooperation with the government of Hakusan City is important.

Generally, when a resident organization organizes local events, the organization often applies to the local government for permission to hold the event, requests support, and asks for assistance with marketing and publicity. In particular, financial support from the local government is an important factor when it comes to organizing events. Receiving financial support from local government, however, can cause organizations' independence to be eroded (Pekkanen, 2006). The giving of financial support is very often the cause of governmental intervention in festivals. Local government's thinking is that 'Financial support comes from tax revenues. We want it to be used appropriately, not wasted'. This attitude is one reason that local governments intervene in the running of local events⁴⁾. In this way, local governments reduce their citizens' involvement in community governance. In order to create a successful local event, therefore, resident organizations must produce their plans very carefully and try and think of ways to fund their events that rely as little as possible on local government funding.

Incidentally, let's take a look at how much local government funding *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* does receive. According to the 2008 budget, they received a ¥500,000 subsidy from Hakusan City. This was less than 20% of their total funding, however. The event is largely funded by local businesses and residents' donations as the organizers tried to avoid relying on local government funding as much as possible (Figure 4).



Data Source: *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri Jikko-linkai* (2008)

<Figure 4> Breakdown of the Festival's Income

How would the local government that provides the funding see such a situation? The impression I got from my interviews with them was that they were trying their best to avoid interfering as much as possible. This festival has earned Hakusan City nationwide renown, and the local government was keen to treat the event as “a chance for us to gather experience of local government cooperating with local residents”⁵⁾.

It would appear that both resident organizations and the local government are involved in a ‘win-win’ situation in Hakusan City.

3. New Challenges

The success of *Yuki-Daruma Matsuri* increased the appetite for activity among members of *Yuki-Daruma Club*. By exchanging information with resident organizations all over the country, they expanded their social network. That network included researchers who focused on regional regeneration and several activists who had supervised NPO activities, among many others. They got ‘social capitals (Putnam, 1993)’ and came to have a new challenge.

One day, one of these researchers pointed out that *Yuki-Daruma Club* did not have a base for their operations. Many resident organizations in Japan are in the same situation. Before it was pointed out to them, Club members had not been aware of the significance of a base of operations. In 2006, *Yuki-Daruma Club* restored a house that had not been used in a long time (Figure 5), and set up their base of operations, the *Yuki-Daruma Café* Project, there.

The *Yuki-Daruma Café* provides the following four functions for this area:

- Operations centre.
- Rest location.
- Cultural experience facility.
- A place for citizens to exchange information.

The use of the facility came about following a request from local officials. The



<Figure 5> *Yuki-Daruma Café*

officials wanted to maintain the area's traditional appearance, so for *Yuki-Daruma* Club to take over the traditional house was a desirable situation for both parties. This Rest Location currently serves traditional local food such as *bota-mochi* (a sweet bean rice cake), pickled herring, and *kacchiri* (a boiled potato dish), and events are held there in collaboration with the local government and some universities.

Yuki-Daruma Club's activities are faced with challenges, involving things like the regular provision of food, maintaining the facility, and educating their successors. However, I have been impressed with the way the resident organization is cooperating with local government in order to make their plans a reality. Their efforts are an important test case which indicates that government-led regional policy in rural Japan is changing.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Cooperation between official organizations and resident organizations is nothing new. There are already joint public-private ventures which are funded and operated by both the government and the private sector. So far, however, these public-private ventures have been organized by government officials, and have therefore not achieved the expected results. What we can see from *Yuki-Daruma* Club's activities is that when ventures are centered on the activities of resident organizations and supported by government, residents' appetite for building a community increases and unique identities are formed. A new wave of these resident-centered ventures is growing in strength.

In order to proceed with such activities, it's important that residents do not rely on government funding, and try and rise as much funding as possible. The more assistance that is received from local government, the more the resident organization comes under their control. Furthermore, an organization that repeats its activities will develop a strong relationship of trust with the local government, which will make future ventures easier. This is something I have learned from the Club's experience.

But how was a small village in a snowy region able to produce such a successful resident organization? The first reason is that there were many residents who were willing to listen to the opinions of 'outsiders', young people, and those with novel ideas. The Shiramine area has always been a pilgrimage destination for mountain worshipers. Residents of these pilgrimage locations, while willing to listen to what visitors have to say, have a strong tendency to try and protect their local area. The founders of *Yuki-Daruma* Club were young people who lived near each other. Neither they nor the local people were not bound by things like seniority by length of service and the precedent principle— things we consider part of Japanese culture. This was the setting in which the Club's activities took place.

The second reason is that *Yuki-Daruma* Club has sufficient understanding of things like local residents' personalities and local characteristics when planning their activities. The collective work of using the snow that fell each year to build snowmen deepened cooperation between people and provided greater opportunities for communication. Furthermore, by refraining from assertively promoting and advertising the festival, they maintained an environment in which the festival could be sustainably held.

The final factor is the fact the resident organization were in control of their relationship with the local government. Some local government employees were members of the Club, and they managed the relationship between the local government and the organization. Mr. Shinichi Kikuchi, who is a local government employee famous for creating specialized regional policies, has noted the elements required for a successful local policy. Especially important, he said, was that 'local policy should respect the activity plans of resident organizations and assist them' and that 'local government employees should make it clear that these organizations are responsible for their own activities' (Chiho-Komuin tou Life Plan Kyokai, 2005). He also said that for resident activities in smaller, poorer communities, cooperation between resident organizations and local government was especially important.

As I mentioned earlier, the public-private relationship in Japan is entering a new era⁶⁾. To conclude this paper, I would like to point out a few issues that may arise as we push forward with these changes. It's necessary for local governments to create an environment where it's easy for resident organizations to propose various plans and ideas.

The regions of Japan have natural beauty not available in the cities and a culture left behind by our ancestors. These are their assets. We have to think about what we must do to improve the quality of life in these regions.

Notes

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1) <http://www5.cao.go.jp/npc/pdf/declaration-english.pdf> (in English, 2011/08/22)

2) Hakusan city is next to Kanazawa City, and lies at the Coast of the Japan Sea. The population of this city is about 100,000. It takes about 2 hours to reach from Kyoto on the limited express 'Thunderbird'.

<http://www.city.hakusan.ishikawa.jp/language/en/> (in English, 2011/04/06)

3) Now he is a Hakusan city government employee.

4) In other words, the more an event relies on local government funding, the more it is bound by the local government's ideas, and the more likely the event is to be an unenjoyable one.

5) The local government is now using *Yuki-Daruma* Club's achievements for its own ends - attracting more

funding from central government, for example.

- 6) In East Asia, there is a tendency to respect officialdom while denigrating ordinary citizens. Governments therefore have to control residents' activities in order to increase the vitality of their regions. It is also necessary for residents to reconnect with their own area's resources and what it has to offer.

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