CHAPTER 3 The Challenges Facing

Local Government

—New Approaches to Regional Problems—

1. Coping with an Ageing Population

Perhaps the most formidable task facing Japan is how to cope with its ageing population. Statistically, the population of Japan is ageing faster than anywhere else in the world. In 2003, 19.0% of the population is now age 65 or older, and this proportion is certain to rise.

In comparison with other countries, the estimated number of years required for the percentage of the aged in the population to increase from 7% to 14% (considered the standard indication of an aged society) is 115 years in France and about 85 years in Sweden, with relatively shorter periods of 40 years and about 47 years for Germany and England, respectively, whereas the figure drops to only 24 years for Japan.

This shorter period can be attributed to two main factors. The first is the increased average life-span of the Japanese. This has risen remarkably since 1935 when men had a life expectancy of no more than 46.9 years, and women 49.6. In 2002, life expectancy for men had reached 78.32, and women 85.23 years.

The second factor is the reduced birth-rate. In 2002 the average was 1.32—much lower than the 2.08 required to maintain the present level of population. This will in turn lead to a lower percentage of younger people in the population.

The speed of ageing is not the same nation-wide and significant local differences can be observed. For example, the phenomenon is markedly worse in municipalities in depopulated areas which young people have been leaving. In such areas an increasing number of municipalities are reaching ratios of 20% or higher, and some are extremely affected at 40% or more. These communities are often facing other difficulties such as deteriorating environmental management of forest and farming areas, collapse of the community itself, and a loss of historical climate or culture. This could threaten the continued existence of regional society. Such a collapse could have serious impact throughout Japan, for example flood damage caused by the decreased water-holding capacity of devastated forest areas.

A ring-toss event at the Silver Sports Festival. (Tochigi Prefecture)

The following challenges face an ageing society: first, an increased need to build a new social system to match the changing pattern of family life, and the increased burden on those still employed; second, providing employment for the elderly; third, financial stability and meaningful lives for the elderly; and lastly, the health and care of the elderly.

Central and local governments must work closely together to find solutions. Local government needs to develop appropriate policies based on changes in the population structure, rather than rely on conventional welfare planning. Such policies should at the very least include measures to encourage an increase in the birth-rate and to provide employment opportunities for the elderly, as well as to help them lead useful and interesting lives.

Population Estimates for Japan
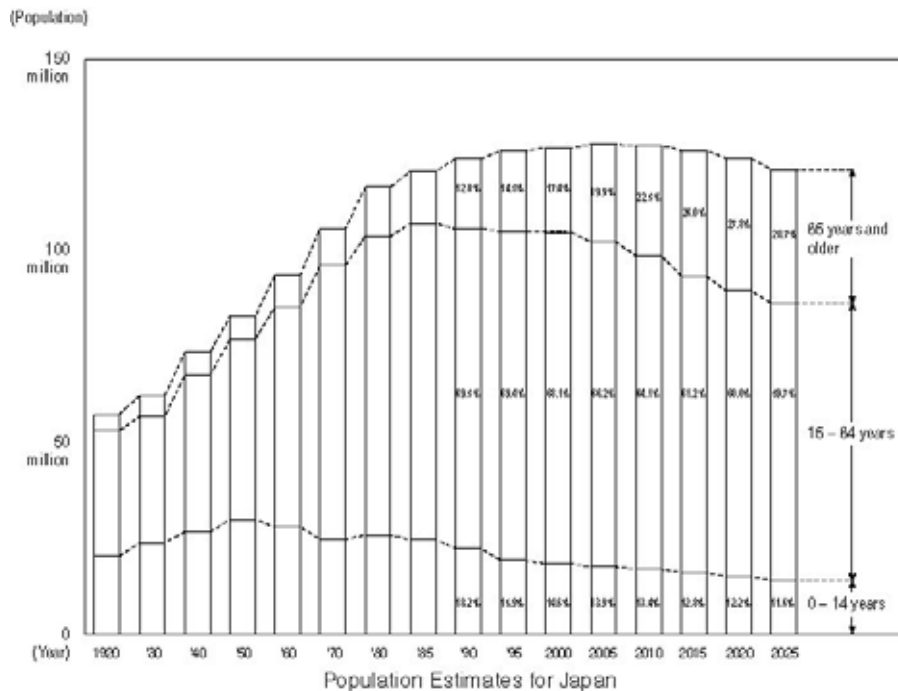
2. Local Community Development

After World War II, Japan achieved high economic growth and dramatic improvement of living standards. Unfortunately the excessive concentration of people and businesses pursuing economic efficiency in the main urban areas brought about a number of problems, including air and water pollution, noise, subsidence, traffic congestion, soaring land prices, the loss of local traditions, and the spread of an "efficiency-first" attitude.

Rural and fishing communities are losing many of their young people and most of their workforce to the large cities, leaving only children and the elderly and putting the communities' existence at risk.

Policies to revitalise local communities are needed if a proper balance between urban and rural development is to be maintained.

The central government has made five National Comprehensive Development Plans since 1962 and promoted many relevant policies. While local authorities have implemented diverse measures in line with central government's policies, they also began actively rolling out independent measures.

"Local community development" is broadly described: it refers to the promotion and revitalisation of many elements associated with residents' daily lives, including the local government process itself, as

well as such things as local culture and tradition, and not just to improvements in the local economy. The process must therefore be both comprehensive and horizontal in approach, rather than depending on the more vertical approach of central government policies.

The "local specialty product" scheme that originated in Oita Prefecture is one example of a typical local development policy that has spread throughout Japan. Its overall objective is for each municipality and community to develop and nurture local products (including tourism and culture) that will appeal to people all over the country, and so contribute to the local economy. More importantly, people develop pride in their local area through such activities, and this in turn will become their motivation for local development. This process is considered the most important thing.

Future measures must be designed to improve residents' awareness, to revitalise local communities and improve the urban and living environment in general, in addition to contributing to local economies.

As an example of its support for local government efforts in this area, central government, i.e., the Ministry of Home Affairs (the present Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), introduced in 1989 a project called "Let's Think How We Can Develop Our Local Area"—now known as the "100 Million Yen Hometown Development," which continues to this day. Unlike conventional projects planned and produced centrally, this one is based on local authorities' original ideas and supported by central government. This allows local authorities to implement development activities in which their regional public can participate.

3. International Relationships

Rapid improvements in transport and communications of late have enhanced the mobility of people, goods and information to a global level, resulting in the building of close relationships that reach beyond conventional boundaries, and an increase in mutual assistance. There are calls domestically as well as from abroad for Japan to be afforded a proper position worthy of its economic power in the international arena. The role Japan should play in the international community is growing larger.

Domestic daily life is increasingly influenced by international factors, for instance: the country's dependence on imported food and raw materials; trade conflicts; hollowing-out of the manufacturing sector by companies moving production overseas; the rapid growth in overseas travel; increase in the numbers of Japanese citizens living abroad; increase in the numbers of foreign nationals residing in Japan; and increase in the numbers of Japanese children educated abroad. The extent of globalisation is such that the boundaries between domestic and international issues are fading and they are becoming more closely related and interwoven.

International relationships, once the preserve of national governments, are now commonplace for local authorities, private organisations, as well as for ordinary individuals. In some fields an independent local-level approach is exactly what is required.

Taking international exchange activities as just one example, multi-layered, citizen-level grass-roots exchanges are viewed as more important for enhancing mutual understanding than official exchanges at the national level. Exchange activities have grown to take more diverse forms from the former emphasis on twinning (sister cities, friendly cities) alone, for example: exchanges at the resident level including youth and female residents; cultural and sporting exchanges; technological and academic exchanges

involving, among others, acceptance of trainees from developing countries; and industrial and economic exchanges.

A reception for the International Boys and Girls Chorus Festival Osaka. (Osaka Prefecture)

Local authorities are responsible for overall regional administration and possess the necessary expertise and technology. With the use of these resources, international exchange has the potential to evolve from "exchange" to "cooperation."

Local government has established the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations in conjunction with the Ministry of Home Affairs (the present Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), to assist local authorities in their international dealings and to promote, among others, the JET Program, which invites to Japan young people from around the world to help as foreign language teachers in Japanese schools.

In the future, local authorities will need to define their own objectives of international involvement and exchange, establish a system to promote citizen-led programs, compile associated information and knowledge, and equip individuals with adequate skills to cope with this trend.

Cultural holiday celebration and English language instruction in the local community.
(Osaka Prefecture)

4. A Better Quality of Life

Local authority urban programs are increasingly moving away from "hardware" activities such as road construction and the development of parks, to comprehensive improvement and maintenance of the residential environment including "software" activities.

In the background are the negative aspects of the progress of national development and urbanisation that accompanied the country's high economic growth. Some of Japan's formerly rich green areas have been lost. There have been water pollution, deterioration of the waterside environment, collapse of urban and rural communities, and loss of traditional culture. Many areas have lost their once beautiful scenery.

This shift in emphasis has grown from the awareness that Japan's economic miracle was achieved at the cost of something very precious.

Administrative policies with the foregoing emphasis may be collectively called amenity-related programs. Creation of comfortable urban environments; protection and nurturing of urban beauty and charm; preservation of urban areas with historic value; creation of urban landscapes; protection and preservation of clean water, beautiful greenery and skies; promotion of city planning that gives appropriate priority to the natural environment-all these are included in amenity-related programs.

The beginning of amenity-conscious administration can be traced back to the late 1960s when people became aware of the destruction of environments with historical heritage, and citizens' movements for preservation (in a form similar to a national trust) sprang up across the country. As a result, municipalities adopted independent bylaws and implemented policies to protect areas with historic value. This in turn led to the enactment of similar legislation, and revision of associated laws at the national level. In addition to the protection of areas with historic value, an increasing number of local authorities are presently adopting bylaws and plans concerning tree preservation, promotion of tree-planting, and protection of noted clean water sources as part of conservation of natural environment. They are also enacting bylaws for the protection of urban landscapes including roads and streetscapes.

Innovative local authorities have implemented policies that actively promote the creation of quality urban areas in addition to the emphasis on environmental conservation, which is more or less a preventive measure.

Many authorities are also adopting environmental policies that take into account the global environment as well as their local environments as part of their amenity-related programs. Global-oriented local environmental policies ranging from waste recycling and construction of recycling facilities to combating global warming will become even more important in the future.

Autumn cherry blossoms
on Saitobaru plateau.
(Miyazaki Prefecture)

5. Cultural Promotion

Culture-related services were introduced around 1978 when the key phrase was "the age of localism." As the nation's economy grew, local areas found themselves increasingly reliant on one-way flow of economic activities and information from Tokyo. In an effort to counter this situation, the revival of local life-styles, traditions and cultures was promoted.

The following sections give some idea of the range and scope of local authorities' activities in this area.

5.1 Cultural Facilities

Activities include: construction of world-class halls designed exclusively for music and theatrical performances, as well as multi-purpose cultural halls; and art galleries, museums and literary collections, each with its own unique and individual identity.

5.2 Culturally Aware Urban Development

Efforts include urban planning with more emphasis on aesthetic beauty, pleasure, individuality, and comfort, rather than the single-minded pursuit of function and economic efficiency.

5.3 Organisational Variety

Activities include: the management of cultural halls by third sector companies; the establishment of prefectural cultural promotion foundations and public corporations responsible for the promotion of popular culture; the provision of cultural promotion funding; and landscape regulation.

5.4 Cultural Diversity

A wide variety of events are being held including outdoor sculpture exhibitions, international film festivals, world drama festivals, popular music festivals, children's song festivals, kite flying contests, historic area fairs, snow festivals, sand festivals, and food and culture festivals.

The historic Chofu District
of Shimonoseki City.
(Yamaguchi Prefecture)

5.5 Restoration of History and Tradition

Movements are underway to restore local history and tradition and preserve historic buildings and areas, enacting bylaws for conservation of cultural assets.

5.6 Educational Tourism

A new kind of tourism is giving tourists an opportunity to learn about local culture and fostering the development of tourism from the perspective of local hospitality.

5.7 Local Identity

Efforts are in place to cultivate or enhance local identity by the use of titles such as "Music City," "Theatre City," "Information City," "Village of Fairy Tales," "History Town" and "Village of Shining Stars." Prefectural and municipal CI (community identity) programs follow the example of the corporate identity programs in businesses.

5.8 Community-based Exchanges and Skills Training

Activities include holding cultural forums and symposiums, providing funding for skills development, dispatching trainees to other areas of Japan or abroad, and renewing and revitalising sister city arrangements and similar activities.

5.9 Review of Administrative Business from a Cultural Perspective

A cultural perspective is being introduced to services at the counter, government documents, information signs, pamphlets and personnel training, etc.

In these and other ways, culture-related services have expanded considerably from the limited activities of the central government's Agency for Cultural Affairs, or local authorities' education boards' culture sections. Culture-related services are able to encompass a wide range of activities in their pursuit of developing local communities with cultural identities that make the residents want to continue living there, and able to be proud of living there.

Gaudy fl oats on parade at the Gion Festival, one of Japan's three

premier festivals. (Kyoto Prefecture)

6. Residents' Participation and Access to Information

As Japan's society has grown more complex and people's thinking and sense of values become increasingly diverse, local authorities have seen the need for new ways of keeping in touch with their respective communities. It is no longer enough to rely on outmoded and ill-used systems of recall and residents' votes, nor simply to rely on elected members and the council process.

Today a variety of methods are used to guarantee that popular opinion is considered fully when projects or services are planned and implemented: symposiums or informal gatherings are held in each area, questionnaire surveys are undertaken, and people are encouraged to voice their opinions and ideas.

To reflect popular opinion directly in day-to-day services in addition to project planning and execution, especially at the municipal level, informal meetings with the mayor are held, citizens' committees are organised and suggestion boxes are made available to give everyone a chance to voice their opinions.

Prefectural and municipal governments have recently enacted disclosure of information bylaws and, at the behest of local citizens, are actively making government information available.

By allowing access to information, local authorities are also helping to maintain public relations by letting residents confirm that the administrative work is being done appropriately.

A performance held in front of the Prefectural Assembly Building. (Yamagata Prefecture)

Local residents and members of the city assembly meeting with consultants to discuss lighting improvements for the city's train station plaza. (Kanagawa Prefecture)

7. In Step with Advances in the IT Revolution

The IT revolution is sweeping through all parts of society, from the economic and industrial sectors to government administration, which lays the foundation of society. This can be seen in the sophisticated application of information technology in the development of "e-government" and "local e-governments." With the establishment of the Basic Plan for the Computerisation of Government Administration in 1997 and the approval of the e-Government Construction Plan in July 2003, concrete action to develop an e-government and local e-governments has been planned for systematic implementation.

As part of this project, a local government wide area network (LGWAN)—a general administrative network that interconnects approximately 3,200 local governments throughout Japan—was developed to facilitate smoother communication among government entities, establish a foundation for advanced information use through sharing, and connect local government organisations throughout the country. In addition, it has been connected with the interministerial network "Kasumigaseki WAN" for data exchange with national government organisations.

At the same time, advances in the IT revolution have increased the need for stricter security measures, with those against cyber attacks, web page tampering, Internet crimes, and cyber terrorism emerging as international issues. In the present sophisticated information society and amid continuing advances in information technology, security and reliability are in great demand along with convenience. To guarantee these needs are met, a multifaceted approach to development in terms of system, technology, management, etc., is necessary. At the same time, a mechanism adapted to the new IT society is needed as well. Local government entities must increasingly be able to adapt accordingly and keep in step with advances in the IT revolution in the future.