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Exploring the sustainable local identity combined with prospective innovation under the declining process due to the depopulation and economic recession <<First version>>

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1. Introduction

As the rural settlements with less people and the aged in the majority are increasing, such policies are promoted as the resettlement, the gathering of hamlets and the reorganization of the existing community functions through the partnership among the residents, the municipal office and the experts in social affairs. It may be a part of necessary countermeasures against the current decline due to depopulation and economic recession, but the viewpoint how to maintain/sublate or create the local value for the future sustainability is not usually set well.

It is true that the security of the job and the welfare to live on is important, but the positive activities to pursue the local identity of the community will play an important role. The sustainability of the community will be enhanced when the community has the local identity worthy and attractive enough for the residents to live with. In this sense, one of the ideal goal will be the structure that the secured job and welfare themselves comprise the activities to build the identity of the community. If it is accompanied with the definite innovation of something regarding economy, lifestyle or thought in order to establish the local identity, the activity will show the typical and profound movement. Empirical evidence of the activities searching for the identity of the community in depopulated and waning rural Japan is illustrated and investigated.

2. Case study: soft tourism

(1) Green tourism in Irihiro village, Niigata

Not a few municipalities in sparsely populated regions are eager to promote the soft tourism. Focusing upon the activities to promote the soft tourism, I will make clear the issues and the challenges to make the soft tourism the determinant of the sustainable local identity.

Green tourism is the frequent option upon which the local advancement activities are pursued in sparsely populated regions by the farmers in collaboration with the municipal office. Firstly, the activities in Irihiro village, Niigata prefecture is told. Irihiro village is a

mountain village located southward of Niigata city. Irihirose municipal office proposed the plan to develop the village through green tourism. As the opportunity of employment was limited and the depopulation was under way, many farmers agreed to promote the green tourism. In its early days the purpose/interest to be attained that the farmers and the stakeholders hoped was various as follows; Stable income, Employment opportunity, Improvement of infrastructure such as roads and public facilities, Maintenance of both tangible and intangible cultural assets, Social cohesion such as communication, bonds and reliance. The concrete businesses and works were mainly proposed by the municipal office and the farmers individually worked on them.

After a while, some farmers' businesses were getting well. However, some gave up. Moreover, as the businesses and works proposed by the municipal office were biased on the economic activities, they could not include the hopes relating to the maintenance of cultural assets or the social cohesion. The discussion and the substantiation process of the items of green tourism were so weak that the inclusion of all the community members did not work well.

Besides it, though both the municipal office and the farmers wanted to pursue the tourism that has nothing to do with the environmental destruction, the garbage issues and the noise issues became serious. For those who are not engaged in the tourism are only compelled to be patient with the negative outcomes. At this stage the questionnaire was carried out on the evaluation of the tourism under way and the willingness to work on the business/works on tourism from now on.

The result of the questionnaire was clear. Those engaged in tourism highly evaluate it and expect it further, but those not engaged in it evaluate it negatively. These people are already reluctant to make the green tourism progress. No measures are implemented by the municipal office to reconcile the gap between the two groups until now.

(2) Facts and lessons from the activities in other regions and authorities

Several lessons are to be drawn from the example of Irihirose village. 1. Discussion, shared values and common target should have been pursued from the first step. 2. The ideas and the projects should have been proposed by the farmers and the stakeholders as well. 3. The course correction or at least the bringing of various opinions together should have been done. 4. The measures to reconcile the current gap for the promotion of the green tourism should be pursued.

Regarding the first item, the activities in Chizu Town in Tottori Prefecture called "One over Zero Movement" make a good reference. In case of this movement, the members of the community are requested to hold more than three sections. Each section has to have its chief separately, rotate the chiefs compulsorily among the members within 5 years, and set the target that they will accomplish ten years' later. The community should include all the households of the settlement(s) as its members and need to collect fixed fees from every member. In case of this "Movement", the initial discussion, preparation and agreement are the conditions

prerequisite to begin the activities. The main purpose of the “Movement” is not to develop/open up the occupation or employment, but to pursue the vitalization of the community in their leisure time. Therefore, such a strict membership system is possible, I know. However, even so, some serious discussion among the members is necessary in the initial stage.

Relating to the second item, the farmers and the stakeholders seem too passive. Each region has its features. Each community has its own components and specific strength, weakness, opportunity and threat. Through the deepening of the mutual understanding, collaborative pursuit to establish the local identity will be realized little by little. Another crucial point on the second item is that through the proposal of the ideas and the projects, the responsibility of the proposer will become evident. Passive response leads to a free riding on the one hand, and the withdrawal and excuse on the other hand. The farmers need to be capable to be a party to the contract of the green tourism. The partnership governance system called “the third way” is to be consciously introduced.

As for the third item, current public projects such as the ten-year agricultural scheme by the prefectural office in Japan usually set the intermediate numerical target and at a quarter stage of the total period the possibility and the difficulties for it are checked and minutely rearranged. In the example of Irihiro village, as there is no numerical target or the standard on earth, it is difficult to rearrange the actual facts. In this sense, the initial scheme with some numerical target by the limited date is indispensable to check the interim conditions.

Regarding the fourth item, if it is not done to reconcile the gap among the farmers and the stakeholders, it is impossible to build the local identity commonly shared by all the members. In the case of Irihiro village, the garbage and noise problems have been actualized as a social problem. Therefore, some measures should be taken first in order to reduce the damage of the garbage and noise problems. After that, the vision for the green tourism from now on should be discussed. In Tenkawa village in Nara prefecture, similar problems are under way. Tenkawa village has the tradition to serve the visitors historically. Until recent years most of them visited Tenkawa village in order to experience and touch the Shugendo, Buddhism or Benzaiten Shrine. In these fifteen years the car camping visitors increased very much in spite of the decrease in the religious visitors. Tourism is becoming more important. There are about 25 camping facilities alongside the river in Tenkawa village. However, as the camping site is managed privately by individual villagers, its prevalence causes a few problems; the noise until midnight, conflict on river use between swimming by camping visitors and the recreational fishing by fishing visitors. The camping tourism brings about profit to the managers and certain shop keepers, but makes a nuisance to ordinary villagers and causes damage upon the river fishing leisure. No dialogue has been sought between them, and there is no trial to reconcile the conflict. Though Tenkawa village is well known as the locality with many good riverside camping sites by those in

surrounding municipalities, it has not succeeded yet in establishing the sustainable local identity. Rearrangement and common rule/agreement on river leisure is to be considered.

3. Local resources/assets and the role of the municipal office

(1) The role of the municipal office from the empirical evidence

Case study in Irihirose village and the related facts in other villages tell us the importance of the municipal office in order to make progress this conflicting project. Each village has various local resources, but it is necessary to raise them to the assets measurable to function as the staple ingredients of the sustainable local identity.

Referring to the examples in several municipalities, the instructive and useful information of the function of the municipalities will become clear. Nosegawa municipality, Nara Prefecture has less than 500 inhabitants. The rate of the land where persons can live is 2.1 %, which is the lowest of all the municipalities in Japan. A same person remained the mayor for 40 years and the depressed mood spread. Nosegawa municipality is composed of 14(16) historically formed communities. Local promotion projects were implemented under the subsidies by the national and prefectural authorities, and several public tourism-related facilities were built. However, few facilities such as the Nosegawa Hotel in Kitaimanishi community have been kept by the local government until today. Under such circumstances, both each household and each community were necessary to tackle the difficulties by themselves. Population transition of each community suggests three of 14 communities have managed to succeed in the survival to a certain extent. One is Kami community from which the mayor has come. Another two are Kitamata/Kamikaito community and Ohmata communities. Kitamata/Kamikaito is located in the central area where the municipal office and some main public facilities are located and has the communal forest of about 2500 ha through which several economic supports upon the original households have been implemented by the community authority. Kitamata/Kamikaito community founded the joint-stock company of the communal forest and manages it. In Ohmata community the cooperative composed of all the households has been running a fish farm more than 15 years. Each household has its own job, but besides it a fish farm has been kept by the community through the sharing of the works. Except these three communities, the collaborative self-reliant activities did not make progress so much and the depopulation is more severe.

In the case of Tenkawa municipality, Nara prefecture, the local government has managed three hot-spring facilities in order to make progress the equal development over the whole range of Tenkawa village. However, the number of the visitors to the western hot-spring facility has been less than others and all of the three facilities seem to have reached their ceiling. Tenkawa municipality is composed of 23 historically formed communities, but one community named Dorogawa has about one third of all the inhabitants in the village and has large common forest

of over 3000 ha. As it is the property ward, it is not taxed. Therefore, originally there have been large gap among the communities in Tenkawa village between Dorogawa and other communities and the gap is rather spreading due to the depopulation and devastation of western communities, even though Dorogawa community is also suffering from the depopulation. Until early 1980's Tenkawa village was busy at forestry, but today few are engaging in forestry works. Some of the upper-class households manage the camping facilities, but as mentioned above, though the forestry needed many employees and created many jobs, camping tourism does not. It is kept as a family business. These facts tell us that Tenkawa municipality has failed to mitigate the gap among the communities, has not positively exploited the job opportunities, nor has set the clear goal it would head for.

In case of Okutama municipality, Tokyo prefecture, the actual conditions are considerably different from the two above mentioned. Okutama municipal office has promoted the eco-tourism and sets the forest and tree culture in the front. In Okutama town there are many big trees. In 1984 it declared to be a town where people enjoy walking in the woods. From the viewpoint of health care Tokyo prefectural office subsidizes for the forest improvement as the countermeasure against the pollen allergy. Since 2004 the Forest Agency and two other national organizations together set up a new kind of tourism named "Forest Therapy Base Project" as a practical policy of the coexistence of man and nature. In 2009, Okutama town was appointed as the region endowed with medically effective forest and equipped with the accommodations and facilities enough to serve the qualified hospitality. Okutama municipal office has put the policy forward for more than 20 years and accomplished it. As for the industrial problems, many measures to promote forestry and agriculture were executed. A joint venture company of local government and private enterprises named Okutama Overall Development Company was established. OODC has generated many new jobs and about 60 employees are hired.

Regarding the solution/mitigation of social problems, Okutama municipality has implemented many trials, most of which have been accepted by both the original inhabitants and the newcomers. Characteristic policy is to invite nursing homes and housings for newcomers. The communication, fusion and convection between the original inhabitants and the newcomers have been intentionally practiced. Traveling services such as a mobile library and visiting nursing care have also served as important life supports otherwise short. The effective area of these measures against social problems is within the commuting distance from central Tokyo. In the area outside the commuting distance, as the severe depopulation is under way, it is difficult to support the communities. Various facts show that Okutama municipal office has carefully and steadily executed the local policies exploring sustainability and to a certain extent the policies are going well under the collaboration of the original inhabitants and the newcomers.

In case of Chizu municipality, Tottori prefecture, many local advancement measures

especially on the social life have been taken under the group name of “One over Zero Movement” by the members of each small communities for a long time. At first the municipal office and the group often clashed each other because the group was regarded as the destroyer of the conventional social order. Since 1990’s the municipal office and the group began to collaborate. Chizu municipality founded the small financial support for the activities by the inhabitants to vitalize the community. Besides the social problems, Chizu municipality supported and pushed ahead the plan by a community to make use of the communal forest for the vitalization of eco-tourism. In April 2010 Chizu Town was appointed as the “Therapy Base” as same as Okutama Town.

The actual differences of the role of the municipal office among the municipalities tell us as follows; it takes a long time to establish a new tourism by making the most use of the local resources, the municipal office is entrusted to combine the communities that do not always share the common interests but are sometimes in conflict with one another, some long-term prospect is necessary to develop and keep a joint business, therefore, the municipal office is requested to have various capabilities such as to negotiate with the communities, to evaluate the prospects, to take countermeasures against the difficulties, and to maintain/enhance the opportunity of employment as long as possible. How to make the mechanism to keep the business among the communities is very important and difficult. Okutama municipal office has made steady progress, but others have not. In case of Chizu town Ashizu community has made steady efforts to make the most use of their common forest, but Chizu town and other communities have not. In Tenkawa village the property gap among the communities is serious, but no chief of the village hitherto has tried to combine/reconcile Dorogawa and other communities. In Nosegawa village not only the municipal office but also the communities themselves are not so eager to activate the local resources. Nosegawa municipal office has not been believed so much by the villagers.

(2) Reorganization of the relationship between small communities and the municipality

Even if a new business is planned and initiated in a small community, it will be combined with other activities and integrated under the supervision of the municipal office. In Japan, there are three kinds of traditional rural communities. A: a settlement composed of about 30’s -50’s constitutes a community. B: a few settlements each of which is composed of less than 30’s constitute a community. C: several settlements each of which is composed of ten or less constitute an administrative unit and each settlement constitutes a daily community. Due to the depopulation a traditional community is generally too small to serve a new business for the customers/guests. Rural communities of type B are usually the fittest to execute the regional advancement activity offered by the municipality with the national/prefectural subsidy. Therefore, a certain relationship between small communities and the municipality is to be

constructed and the structure of the new business will be reorganized. In addition, stakeholders outside a village sometimes get involved in it. By using the “Forest Therapy Base Project” in Okutama town and in Chizu town as an example, the reorganization will be illustrated.

Table 1 shows the managers and the elements and relevant items of the “Forest Therapy Base Project” in both municipalities. In Okutama town, the municipal office plays a leading role. In 1984 the municipal office declared to be a town where people come and enjoy a walking in the woods. Since then the municipal office steadily put it into practice and was appointed as a Forest Therapy Base in 2009. The walking roads are mainly composed in the public woods. Regarding the setting of the roads, the municipal office intentionally excluded the private forests because the roads and the surrounding landscape should be maintained for a long time without change. Regarding the guides and assistors section, many non-inhabitants positively applied to be the guides and assistors, which made this tourism open, participant, interactive and multiple. The municipal office expects more inhabitants to apply for the guides and assistors because it will serve as a complimentary employment opportunity for the forestry workers. As for the accommodation section and the products and cuisine section, the municipal office clearly sets the standard to maintain the quality of them. The participants can select some of various courses. As the potential visitors are many and the careful preparations have been done, the “Forest Therapy Base Project” has launched out successfully. In order to make this tourism more economically effective for the inhabitants, more inhabitants are expected to commit themselves by the municipal office.

In Chizu town, one Oaza named Ashizu with large communal forest most of which belongs to the quasi-national park has been longing for making use of it for the vitalization of the eco-tourism with a walking in the woods near the falls and to the river source. The current mayor wished it to develop this tourism through the “Forest Therapy Base Project” in 2008 and in 2010 it was appointed. Many things have been energetically considered and five sections are established. However, on the matters of trainers and P R, the public sectors such as the municipal office, the municipal tourist association and the prefectural branch organizations play the main role. Regarding the accommodation section and the cuisine section, the existing tourist homes and restaurants are expected to serve, but the municipal office has not set any standard yet and is still groping for the secure of the feasible and sufficient business managers. Unlike the case of Okutama town, the ordinary persons outside Chizu town little serve as the guides or assistors of the new tourism. The positive participation of the villagers will be necessary in case of Chizu town in order to get the business well under way. The integration and the role sharing of the Oaza communities under the superintendence of the municipal office will be necessary to make the five or more sections function successfully.

4. Foundations of the sustainable local identity

(1) From the formal region to the substantial region

The case of Okutama town tells us the regional unit is at first starts from the formal region, but the participation and the discussion of the villagers and outsiders change it into the substantial region.

(2) Social network, land management and the meaning to live in the region

Agriculture, land management requires people to live in the region. In this sense, the forestry does not grow the number of people who live in the region.

5. Conclusion

Local Action Group (LAG)

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