

Community Development of Synergistic Effects: An Interaction Program between an Agricultural Community and a Suburban Community

Problems between Related Agricultural and Suburban Areas in Japan

In Japan most agricultural areas are situated on hillsides, and we have subsequently lost the natural landscape. From an economical perspective there is external pressure to import foodstuffs and a decrease in the market value of those crops. In terms of agricultural infrastructure, there exists a vicious circle pertaining to the difficulty of working hillside areas, the decreasing numbers of farmers, the changed balance of plant-types, and harm caused to animals. The government has been driving an intensive agricultural policy, and has recently given attention to the various areas: the functions of flood control, ecological conservation, the continuance of culture, recreation and so on. It has also begun intensive support of agricultural communities, for example introducing exchange projects between urban areas and agricultural areas.

On the other hand, suburban areas, which were built in 1960s to 1970s, have the problems managing community issues. As Japan's "ageing society" comes into being, the government is unable to sufficiently implement an effective welfare service, but the network of people is weak as individualization. In addition, there are problems regarding urban design and city planning: lifestyle facilities, such as daily stores, hospitals, and community centres, are not conveniently located for elderly people. The government has started acting to revitalize these areas, but only in the public sector, rebuilding dwellings and buildings used by government services or public corporations. In suburban areas, which have been subdivided into privately owned lots, people need to create a more cohesive community and improve their surrounding environment.

The purpose of this paper

We have been engaged in community development between an agricultural community and a nearby suburban community. In 2006, we organized a community development association, instigated "Making The Ohgi Satoyama Museum Story", and promoted an interactive project between various groups. This association consisted of community groups, a number of NPOs, and The Shiga Prefectural University. This project is directly under the control of the National Government. I participated as a director, belonging to Community Design Centre, Japan

In this paper, I will firstly explain the situation of both communities and show the purpose and outline of our project. Secondly, I will report on the individual programs and their effects. Thirdly, I will analyze the synthesized effects and the future prospects of this project. Finally, I will indicate the role of the NPO sector in promoting interactive community development programs in regards to: 1) the relationship with the government, 2) the relationship with the community, and 3) the management of the NPO organization.

Community Background: Ohgi and Ohgi-no-Sato

Ohgi and Ohgi-no-Sato are in Otsu city, Shiga prefecture. Ohgi is an agricultural

community, which dates back to the 8th century. It consists of "Tanada" which are small multi-layered hillside ricefields; this landscape is famous in Japan. Ohgi consists of four communities and has its own traditional culture, shrine and temple festivals, houses, music, foods, tight community networks and so on. The area is about 750 ha (303 acre), with a population of about 2600. Most farmers are elderly, and young farmers have supplementary non-farming jobs and are not avidly interested in handing down their traditions. The residents have formed a union, and sketched an initial plan for community development.

In the 1970s, Ohgi-no-Sato was built through public corporation as an upper-middle class suburban town. Most of the houses are detached dwellings and privately owned. The area is 80 ha (32 acre) with a population of about 8500. Many residents are now elderly, and need welfare services, but they do not have own cultural network and do not interact with each other a great deal. There are large parks, but only one community centre, which is inaccessible by foot. The Ohgi-no-Sato residents have also formed a community development association, and have considered the future of their community welfare infrastructure.

From a historical perspective, the area of Ohgi-no-Sato belongs to Ohgi, and the new suburban community began as an adjunct to Ohgi: initially they had the same community association and elementary school. Although the Ohgi-no-Sato community separated in the 1990s, there are still existing networks: some individuals and groups from Ohgi-no-Sato rent farms from, and communicate with, Ohgi residents. However, their community development associations have not exchanged their plans and cooperated with each other.

Project Outline: "Making The Ohgi Satoyama Museum Story"

The theme of this project, "Making The Ohgi Satoyama Museum Story", intends to make a new community of Ohgi and Ohgi-no-sato, respecting the inherent characteristics of each and using them as a catalyst for the other. We diagrammatized the relationship between the landscape and daily life to ensure a consistent project story.

Basically, the agricultural area sustains the "Tanada" ricefield landscape, and consequently provides its own food and culture. In suburban areas, people manage community spaces, and these incubate their own individual suburban culture. We added an interactive element to this circle: "Tanada" now offer their crops and culture to Ohgi-no-sato through community spaces, and in turn the many visitors and diverse culture of Ohgi-no-sato stimulates the cultural make-up of Ohgi. For Ohgi, the main goal of this project was to conserve and maintain the "Tanada" landscape, and that for Ohgi-no-sato was to make their own original culture and create strong community spaces.

We implemented a number of programs. For Ohgi: 1) the development of an exchange program for children, 2) the "Tanada" ricefield landscape, 3) creating a rice distribution channel and a new brand of Ohgi Tanada Rice, and 4) networking between producers and consumers. For Ohgi-no-sato, we promoted 1) a community farm in Ohgi, 2) a community farm near Ohgi-no-sato, 3) a daily community house for a month, and 4) practical use of the University cafe.

The Purpose of, and Programs in, Ohgi

The current situation is one of decreasing numbers of farmers, coupled with increasing numbers of abandoned farms. The farmers have cultivated "Tanada" ricefields, consequently challenging some of the government support systems. They want to sell the rice at a fair price, one which reflects their labor. They tried the agricultural exchange program with urban residents, and sold the "Ohgi Tanada Rice" on the government website but neither of these projects were highly effective. There is nothing to guide Tanada and the culture of Ohgi, and there are not a great number of consumers who wish to buy Tanada Rice through an uninteresting government website.

We set up two axis programs. One is the exchange program with urban residents, including Ohgi-no-Sato: the Ohgi-no-Sato children's educational exchange in summer, and the Ohgi Satoyama Art Festival in winter. The second axis program is the creation of an effective distribution channel of Tanada Rice. This consists of making a trade-link between the farmers and the consumers' co-operative and "Forum for Conservation and Creation of the Tanada Ricefield Landscape".

The Exchange Program for Children

In this program, children and their mothers walked around Ohgi village and the ricefields, taking photographs of their favorite landscapes. They also communicated with farmers in order to understand the relationship between agriculture and the food which they eat every day.

From the analysis of these photographs, we found that children were interested in the traditional life style of Ohgi village, the hillside ricefield landscape, and especially the local plants and animals. They took pictures of traditional houses, small shrines, many small statues, ricefields in the shape of a horseshoe, wild flowers, and crabs in small rivers. In addition, they were especially impressed by the farmers, and the mothers recognized the importance of food education.

The Ohgi Satoyama Art Festival

For the past 6 years, the Kyoto Creative Design College has been engaged in maintenance of "Satoyama", which means both hills and community life. Students have been making art in response to their impressions of Ohgi village, but had as yet had no chance to return their artwork to show there. For three days in February 2007, we held the "Ohgi Satoyama Art Festival" to show students' artworks and their activities. In this festival, we rented four spaces: a community centre, two traditional houses, and a traditional hermitage. Visitors could enjoy walking around Ohgi village and the Tanada ricefields, and could also have tea and traditional sweets. We had confidence that this would be a good chance for the residents of Ohgi to use their traditional architecture and to introduce their culture to visitors. At this time, we researched, and later evaluated, visitors' responses to the festival and to the new "Tanada Rice" brand project.

Despite its remote location, more than 200 visitors came to this festival. From the questionnaire / survey, we concluded several things: most of visitors enjoyed the artworks, as well as the landscape of Ohgi and Tanada, in particular that traditional places offer an atmosphere of hospitality. They were also interested in the new brand of Tanada Rice.

Creating a Distribution Channel for Tanada Rice by Introducing the New Brand of "Ohgi Tanada Rice"

After discussion with farmers, we approached a consumer co-operative in Shiga prefecture. It has begun supporting the producers and consumers and made networks between them. It recognized the need to conserve Tanada ricefields and committed to the purchase of the new brand of "Ohgi Tanada Rice". However, this co-op only trades organic crops. The Ohgi rice crop, which farmers group-cultivated, has a low level of chemicals.

The co-op representative negotiated with farmers, and decided that the cooperative would buy the Ohgi Tanada Rice this year as a trial. The farmers then formed a new group to challenge themselves to switch to organic cultivation.

In addition, we wanted to hold a competition for the new rice brand packaging design. We proposed the plan to the Kyoto Creative Design College and they accepted. They are happy to be able to offer students the chance to design for actual practice. In all, 26 designs were collected. A judging committee, consisted of a farmers' group, a community farm group, a consumer corporation and a photographer, decided upon a winning package design and a logo.

Creating the Farmer-Consumer Network: "Forum for Conservation and Creation of the Tanada Ricefield Landscape"

On the final day of the art festival, we held this forum and the judging of the package design. The purpose of this forum was to make a network between farmers and urban residents, to consider and promote the movement of conservation and creation of the landscape of Tanada, and to advertise the new brand of rice. We called in a famous photographer as a judge and panelist. This photographer is well-known for photographing Tanada Ricefields, and has a studio in Ohgi. We also called in a pioneer of organic farming to be a panelist, in compliance with the consumer corporation association's request.

About 40 people participated in this forum, including community groups, University and College students, and residents of Ohgi, Ohgi-no-sato and other areas. We introduced each activity and discuss ways to resolve the issues related to Tanada ricefields. We reached a consensus that we need to promote this project further for better understanding the relationship between the landscape and daily culture, and also the necessity of the conservation and creation of Tanada, making our network stronger.

The Purpose of, and Programs in, Ohgi-no-sato

There are some community activities in Ohgi-no-sato. In this aging district, people use the public housing, which developed this area. A community farm project group has attempted re-cultivation of abandoned Tanada ricefields. A food culture group has begun to introduce safe organic foods for daily life and pass on traditional foods to children. In addition, the local Seian University of Art and Design wants to collaborate with the community.

We set up four places to create networks of people. The first one is a community farm project in Ohgi, and the second is near Ohgi-no-sato for daily use. The third is a

community house in an area where a great number of elderly residents live, and the fourth is in the Shiga Prefectural University cafe.

Cultivation of Abandoned Tanada Ricefields: Ohgi Community Farm

The Tanada community farm group has about 30 members and works to restore abandoned farms. They have held a number of events with residents of Ohgi, including making traditional rice cakes and pasta, as well as traditional New Year's ornaments. We helped them to continue these activities and researched members' opinions. We also researched the residents' awareness of their local environment and daily lives, and their impressions of the Ohgi community. About 300 people responded.

From our questionnaire survey, we found the following points. Residents of Ohgi-no-Sato were fond of the surrounding natural environment and wanted to communicate with Ohgi. The members of the community farm group confided that their activities are an important chance to understand the cycle between agriculture and their food, and to communicate with Ohgi. Compared with other residents, these members recognized the traditional culture of Ohgi absolutely.

Community Farm near Ohgi-no-Sato

We enabled the lease of a community farm near Ohgi-no-Sato so that elderly residents can easily visit and can communicate with each other. Residents cultivated many kinds of vegetables, got a good harvest, and enjoyed parties.

In regards to cultivation, it takes only 10 minutes to get there, but it is not accessible for elderly people. In addition, it imposed a burden on young leaders to maintain the farm, because it is not provided with clean water or with a place for the elderly to rest. We agreed that we must have a farm in Ohgi-no-Sato area, but that greater preparations are required so that there are ample equipment and facilities provided.

Making a Community House Consensus

The community house "Seeds of Himawari" (Sunflower Seeds), which had been gathering in the elderly district once every two weeks, faced difficulty. After the public corporation was privatized, it demanded that residents purchase the building and lot. Residents voted and decided that they would not buy, because the asking price was so expensive and the house was old and not so comfortable. The corporation requested that residents return in March 2007. Residents would then have another chance to vote, but leaders were anxious that residents would lose the space, unaware of its necessity.

We experimentally opened "Seeds of Himawari" every day for a month, holding an Ohgi farmer's market, a traditional sweets shop called Dagashi-ya, a community lunch party and so on. Every day about 30 people visited the house, had tea and chatted. In particular, a lot of children came and enjoyed shopping for sweets: there is otherwise no sweet shop for children to call in on, on their way home from school. On two occasions, we distributed bulletins to residents to let them know about this house, and then surveyed visitors' opinions about community house. Their response was that they need it; children asked leaders to continue Dagashi-ya and for their help with the shop. They also enjoyed community lunches with vegetables grown in Ohgi.

After this challenge and experiment, residents voted again, and decided to purchase the house and lot. Many residents had become aware of the necessity of the house via the bulletins, and a number of residents offered their help.

Networking with the University Cafe

Throughout Japan, there are so many local variations of the traditional New Year's Zouni, rice cakes with soup. We regard the suburban community as a melting pot of people, and at a community festival we researched the kinds of Zouni to be found in Ohgi-no-Sato. About 120 residents enjoyed this research game.

We then held the "Zouni Community Forum" in January 2007 at the University Cafe, (which uses Ohgi's organic vegetables and other farm produce). We asked residents who belong to the local food culture group, to cook Zouni at the forum. We also invited the residents of Ohgi. At the forum, we were able to provide 5 types of Zouni, including Ohgi Zouni. We thought we were limited to 100 participants, but about 180 residents enjoyed it and took part. All the cooks shared their recipes and we could all clearly understand that every Zouni dish reflects the local environment and traditional ways, all of which are safe and healthy. The University offered to continuously support this event.

Networking Between Residents to Maintain Collaboration

We had some chances to confirm and discuss this project. At first, some community groups and farmers did not understand its purpose and promotion activities. We had to explain these points separately, one-by-one, because it was difficult to set a single meeting they had to attend. Sometimes the atmosphere was awkward, but finally we overcame the hurdles together, and everyone could understand each individual point as well as the overall policy.

The Synthesized Evaluation and Future Prospects

I will now detail the synthesized evaluation of this project, the characteristics of both communities, and the future prospects of this project. In the context of the purpose of this project, we succeeded in enabling the residents to understand the relationships between the landscape, agriculture and culture, networking residents within the community, and networking the two communities. Important factors were respecting the characteristics of each community, exchanging their good points, and introducing the support of the NPO, the College and the University.

In regards to Ohgi, the creation of a rice distribution channel was well received by community leaders, so that they could start a fresh step towards the conservation of Tanada ricefields. "The Ohgi Satoyama Art Museum" inspired them through the potential of art as a communication tool. Both are long-term plans, which need to be continuously improved. Certain existing problems of traditional community need to be tackled in relation to the above implementations; for example, in regards to the changeover to organic cultivation, as farmers prefer to use chemical practices. Also, it is difficult to build a consensus of four district communities in Ohgi. Otsu municipal government has had trouble negotiating with them. In addition, even though they have the ability to organize events to hold so many traditional events, it is difficult for

residents to join in with new activities, as they like to be inconspicuous amongst the community.

In Ohgi-no-Sato, the “Zouni Community Forum” won popularity. The community leaders got a lot of ideas for their future activities. The community house and farm projects showed the necessity and possibilities of community space. They need these spaces in community areas and need them well-equipped. To acquire or create a community farm, they could use the space available in a big park. To improve their community house, they could ask for the support of architectural skills from the University and management skills from an intermediary NPO. They have to negotiate with the government, other community groups and associations in Ohgi-no-Sato, involving more residents. However, compared with Ohgi, the leaders in Ohgi-no-Sato are not as good at negotiation and involvement.

As a point in common, both community development associations are too big to correspond to each complex problem. They would need support to make comprehensive projects and community consensus, coordinating each community group and district, and negotiating with government and/or other parties.

Recommendation: Potential and Role of the NPO Sector

Through this project, we recognize the following points to be the role of the NPO sector.

1) Both community development associations require comprehensive plans but they are both too broad and large to act on this point. Each small-scale community group acts in their own way, but they do not have a chance to make any synthesized projects or to network with each other. We diagrammatized both communities, linking each social nucleus, made a synthesized project overview, and considered the balance between the associations and the small-scale groups. Additionally, both community leaders have their own way of negotiating. In Ohgi, they prefer concrete direct action to considered thoughtful action; in Ohgi-no-Sato, they tend to fear of the ignorance of residents, and consider this before taking action. We interpreted their initial negative attitude as a chance to make more creative programs and considered the problems with them - we followed the precept "when in Rome do as the Romans" and finally they developed trust in us. We could continue to be in a position of trust as a coordinator and specialist to promote projects and create consensus in both communities.

2) In terms of the relationship with the government, we could promote the project within the private sector with our creative ideas and flexible activities. The government has proven that it is not able to carry out these projects: for example, they were unsuccessful in negotiating a specific resolution to implement a rice distribution channel. Both communities have serious problems, which are complex and need a lot of time to resolve successfully. We have built the network with both communities and other parties, and could continue to play a role in future community development. It is paramount that the government supports these community development projects continuously, in collaboration with NPOs. This project is under the direct control of the national government, and we are therefore able to act with flexibility. Unfortunately, most government support currently has great restrictions: we cannot depend on the government for labor costs or rent for housing. The government must recognize the important role of NPOs and adopt the necessary measures.

3) In this project, members of two NPOs and the Shiga Prefectural University collaborated as project directors. In actual fact, we formed a research organization "for community development in a suburban area of Otsu city" in conjunction with some staff members from the municipal government's city planning section. We planned and proposed this plan to the national government and negotiated in direct cooperation with communities. Also, as we have broad experience and a wide network, we were able to bring together a great number of staff to hold events and edit leaflets and bullets as occasion demanded. In continuance of this project, we would be able to introduce many specialists and NPOs to inspire both communities continuously. With increased funding for additional staff-members and skills training, especially for young staff who could plan, negotiate and implement together, we could have even greater success. It is crucial to make concerted effort to reinforce and strengthen each NPO organization.