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Revitalization of Communities: Report From Koura-cho, Shiga and Miyama-cho, Kyoto

We recently had the opportunity of visiting Koura-cho in Shiga and Miyama-cho in Kyoto, and seeing the activities of "Ground Work", the community revitalization project which relies for its success on the participation of local residents. Under the banner of slogans such as "Dashing town of many streams" (Koura-cho) and "A village of thatched houses and streams creating original views of beautiful Japan" (Miyama-cho), residents and local authorities are working jointly on improving the living environment and at the same time promoting local communities. These two particular efforts are often cited as successful examples.

Koura-cho, which has a population of 8,500 people, is located to the east of Lake Biwa and south of Hikone City. Although the town produces high-quality rice, it has always experienced difficulties securing sufficient supplies of water. As a result, local people have a special feeling about water, and this plays an important role in the revitalization of their town. The residents' awareness of water and the environment was further raised after a confrontation emerged around 1980 between public works and landscape conservation. Since 1990, each community has established a "village revitalization committee", and public environmental projects concentrate on the creation of a good living environment in order to establish the concept of a "water town", making the most of the clean water and rich greenery that the town possesses. As a result, the whole town is currently characterized by the sort of scenery which conjures up images of a water-front park. Miyama-cho is located to the north of central Kyoto. It has a population of 5,500 people and is about one and a half hours away from Kyoto station by car. Around 96% of the town is covered with forest. In 1989, a "village revitalization promotion committee" was established in each community. These have been working on a tourism development that fully features traditional thatched houses and the area's rich natural resources. The concept of "green tourism", which promotes exchanges between local people and visitors from urban areas, is encouraged and efforts are also being made to create distinctive local products such as soy-bean paste, konjaku and local breeds of chickens.

Each local area has its own unique characteristics. These need to be fully utilized in the process of the towns' revitalization. At the same time these factors set limits to the type of activity that can be carried out. Therefore, efforts for town revitalization must start from these unique characteristics. Given this dependence upon unique circumstances, it may be difficult to create a universal manual for town revitalization, however there is one common point in the efforts of the two towns - town revitalization begins when local people themselves rediscover the positive aspects of their town. Also in both cases, although many activities are conducted jointly by local residents and governments, each is more of a local authority-led effort conducted by enthusiastic local government employees.

Another characteristic of these activities is their efficiency. Their small-scale nature makes delicate approaches possible. For instance, in Koura-cho, each house has installed a simple device made of charcoal filled bamboo to purify household effluent. The idea is to clean water at the nearest point of discharge, when the contamination is not yet too severe. Another important aspect to the success of the schemes is ensuring that exchanges between locals and tourists take place at an appropriate scale. The revenue from "green tourism" has become significant in Miyama-cho. Although the more tourists that come, the better it is economically, people here seem to be fully aware of the possible losses that uncontrolled tourism could incur (as in the case of Kiyosato ?). These examples provide important lessons not only for community revitalization efforts in Japan, but also for assistance for developing nations.

(Onuma and Koto in Koura-cho and Miyama-cho)



Household effluent purification device (Koura-cho)



A cluster of thatched houses (Miyama-cho)