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Leaf-Business by Aged Women in Rural Village

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Extracted from Tadaaki Ooe, "Chi-i-ki no Chi-ka-ra: Syoku, Nou, Machi-zukuri" Iwanami shinsho, 2008 ("Local Power: Food, Farming and Building a Commons") Translated by Yoshihiro Nakano



**Coalition of Socially Responsible Small & Medium
Enterprises in Asia**

Quezon city, Philippines

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Foreword

After having ushered in the Asian Solidarity Economy Forum (ASEF) in Manila (2007) and Tokyo (2009), the Coalition of Socially Responsible SMEs in Asia (CSRSME Asia) is reaching a new plateau and currently faces new challenges and a qualitatively different kind of environment. At the global level, systemic crisis has intensified poverty and inequality. Food prices have escalated and increased the incidence of hunger, pushing many more people into absolute poverty. Contraction of trade and manufacturing drove more people into vulnerable employment, increasing unemployment/ underemployment and diminishing household incomes

The global crisis has wreaked havoc on domestic economies. High cost of inputs, lack of fair credit, & lack of access to wholesale market have discouraged farm production. Controlled by profiteering private traders, the agricultural marketing system is stacked against farm producers and urban consumers who themselves are fragmented. People as a whole lack unity and the political will to advance towards a sustainable and socially responsible economy.

Acting on its vision towards a compassionate, solidarity-based economy, the CSRSME Asia espouses the notion of building an alternative economy by bringing together various socio-economic stakeholders in a continuing dialogue and cooperation. It has organized and/or supported Learning Journeys in several countries (e.g. Indonesia, India, Japan, Nepal, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) to engage various stakeholders in the challenge of rethinking the economy.

Against this backdrop, the CSRSME Asia with funding support from the Charles Leopold Mayer Foundation (FPH) and in collaboration with some Universities and a host of civil society organizations in Asia, has called for an Asian Dialogue on Oeconomy on a broader scale with the aim of broadening the understanding of alternative economies and how to deal with the new environment in the coming years through sharing of research studies, reflections, and proposals.

“Leaf Business by Aged Women in Rural Village” by Tadaake Ooe is one of the case studies currently being circulated among contributors and subscribers to the Asian Dialogue on Oeconomy. It is hoped that the Asian Dialogue on Oeconomy will help build a robust exchange of information and experience sharing that could impact the development of solidarity economy initiatives in Asia and beyond

CSRSME Asia
Quezon city, Philippines

The Elderly Women of Kamikatsu



This is Kamikatsu town in Tokushima Prefecture, the Eastern edge of the Shikoku island region of West Japan--partly facing the Pacific Ocean and close to Osaka. It usually takes 1 hour 45 minutes to get there from Tokushima Station, the capital of the prefecture, by taking a route bus first and then changing to a town bus.

While walking in the town, I see houses lean on a high slope that almost reaches the sky. Two thousands and ninety two people are living in this town (as of March, 2006), and this is the smallest population in the whole Shikoku. Surprisingly 3833 people, nearly twice the population, visited this mountain-locked small town in the fiscal year 2005.

Their aim is to see leaves, the leaves that can be found everywhere in Japan, such as nanten (nandina), momiji (maple leaves), and kaki (persimmon). Being called tsumamono, these leaves are normally used for traditional Japanese cuisines, for example kaiseki, to decorate the appearance of dishes.

In Kamikatsu, the elderly women are growing leaves and flowers of every season in their gardens, fields and mountains, selling them by branding it irodori (i.e. colourful stuff), and earning well.

"We used to grow and sell oranges but they died because of a heavy winter breeze. We were badly off. But after switching business to the selling of leaves, we have been much better off. Things are significantly different. It's not a hard work and the leaves are not heavy to carry. We are able to enjoy a healthy life. We work in the daytime and sleep well in the night. In my case, I always wake up at six in the morning and have a breakfast with seven family members including two grand-grand children. I cook a lot with a big family, so the food tastes good."

Explaining like this, Tsuneko Suzuki, 84 years old, showed a perfect smile to me. Mrs. Suzuki is living in a four-generation family. They are running a shop that sells rice, fertility and alcohol as well as growing fruits such as sudachi, yuzu, yukou--the speciality of the town??and rice for self-supply. When she was young, she carried a

rice bag, "komedawara", which weighed 60kg.

Struggle From the Bottom

The leaf business project was proposed by Tomoji Yokoishi. Mr. Yokoishi was born in Tokushima City in 1958. After graduating an agriculture college in 1979, he was appointed to an agricultural cooperative (JA Kamikatsu) in Kamikatsu town. At that time, the mayor of the town and the leader of the JA were struggling with the gloomy performance of orange farming and forestry, the principal industries of the town, and sought advices from Mr. Yokoishi in an attempt to introduce a fresh blow to a closed community of the mountain village.

Yokoishi was already known around the area for his ability of coordinating various town events. However, once he started, he faced a number of problems. He was virtually an outsider and it was not easy to come to terms with the geography of the town and to get his face recognized by the local people. While watching the workers at the town council and the JA drinking in the noon, he found that the town is in a state of decline.

In 25th February 1981, a heavy winter breeze had attacked Kamikatsu and the oranges had all died. The people were urged to seek alternative ways for earning their living, transforming the direction of their agricultural business.

The turning point came in the autumn of 1986 when Yokoishi happened to come across "tsumamono" in a sushi restaurant in Osaka. He saw a young lady next to him impressed by a green maple leaf on her dishes and bring it home by wrapping it with a handkerchief. In reflecting on this scene, he reached a certain conviction that he could do business with leaves; while such leaves were everywhere and too common in Kamikatsu, they were rare and valuable to people in a different place.

Starting a 'Green' Business

When he first explained his idea to the farmers in the town, nobody believed that they could earn their living with leaves. However, after a continuous persuasion, four female farmers agreed to sell their kaboku (flower trees) that were cultivated for ikebana. The sales did not go well at the beginning.

The main reason for this failure lies in that these female farmers and Yokoishi did not know how to pack the products effectively and how these flower trees were used in traditional Japanese restaurants. The products managed to be bought with a quite cheap price, 5 or 10 yens per pack.

Nonetheless they worked hard in marketing their products to every region of Japan, and their sales improved from 1.17million yens of the first year to 21.61 million yens in the third year, in 1988. The farmers in the town joined the project successively and the number of participants reached 44. Since then, the sales continued to grow except for the period when Yokoishi was absent from the project, and they reached 226.25 million yens in the fiscal year 2005.

The total number of the farmers who have joined the project is currently 195, of which 60 take main initiatives. Their average age is 68 year old. The number of products is 320 items. Put it bluntly, their surrounding gardens, fields and mountains are the "catalogues" of products.

The maple and persimmon trees once annoyed the farmers when they produced a lot of fallen leaves that blocked the streets. However they suddenly changed to "treasure trees" which help them to earn their living. A merit of this project is that the elderly women in the town are already familiar with their natural environment; they know well the way a wind blows through the fields and mountains as well as the cycle of daylight; they know where to plant what. They can apply the wisdom and skills that they had cultivated from their everyday lives to this new business.

Shipping Procedure and Sales

The Irodori business adopts two types of shipping procedure: 1) regular shipping (to ship the collected leaves everyday) and 2) on-demand shipping. The latter contributes to high sales. The best-sold leaf through the year is middle-sized nandina (22% of the total sales); the next is green maple leaves (15%), and small-sized nandina, bamboo leaves, and red maple leaves follow.

The mass media often focus too much on the amount of sales in representing the success of the leaf business. They report, for example, that the elderly women earn 100 million yens per year or that mountain leaves turn into income. However, according to Yokoishi, the average amount of sales per person is 1.50 million yens and approximately 40 people earn more than 3 million yens. The fact that the elderly women earn such amount of income is, of course, not negligible. However, more significant is that they vibrantly feel a joy of living. This hints at a way to tackle the problem of an aging society.

Inventing a Social Role for the Aged People

Takehiro Toyota, who has joined the Irodori project for three years, reckons as follows: "For human beings, the most important thing is to have a social role. Social role and evaluation: these two make people active and vital".

Actually, Mr. Yokoishi has created social roles for the elderly people of the town by introducing an information system and by helping them to do the business on their own. The farmers receive the order of on-demand shipping at ten o'clock in every morning via fax. They respond to this demand immediately and decide the amount of shipping of the day by adjusting the balance between the amounts of regular shipping and on-demand shipping. In addition, Yokoishi developed the PCs customized for the elder people and introduced them to 70 households.

Today, the participants of the project can check the achievement of sales, unit price and the estimated amount of sales, and compare them with those of the previous years with ease. This contributes to enhancing the motivation of the participants and inspiring

them toward a more creative way of doing business. These elderly people in Kamikatsu analyze and calculate information, cultivate and collect trees and leaves, pack the products, and carry them to the shipping station. They use their brains and bodies systematically.

Leaf Business as an Alternative Welfare Activity

The aging rate of Kamikatsu (the percentage of people who are older than 65 to the total population of the town) is 47%, while the relevant figure for Tokushima prefecture is 24%. The national average is 20%. Besides, people who are older than 75 occupy 26% of the total population of the Kamikatsu town, compared to the national average of 8%. Despite this, the number of those who are officially recognized as "a person who needs care" (the level 5 of the national criteria), is extremely small: only 14 people of the total population (i.e. 0.72%). It can be said that the elderly people in Kamikatsu are fine and healthy in comparison to other advanced welfare local communities in Japan.

Another data also provide support to this observation. In Kamikatsu, medical cost per person (the expense by the national health insurance) is approximately 260,000 yens, that is, the 19th less costly among 50 municipalities in Tokushima prefecture (as of 2004). The amount is almost equivalent to that of Tokushima city whose aging rate is 18%. The singularity of Kamikatsu becomes clearer when we compare it with other towns that have a homologous population structure. For example, in Ichiu town (currently renamed as Tsurugi town), whose aging rate is 45%, the medical cost per person is approximately 460,000 yens; in Kodaira town (currently renamed as Mima city), 44%, 450,000 yens. A simple mathematics shows that Kamikatsu economizes medical cost by about 400 million yens, compared with Ichiu.

Indeed, the leaf business of Kamikatsu provides an opportunity of rehabilitation and social inclusion for disabled elderly people. For instance, an elderly woman, who had her backbone injured in a bus accident 30 years ago, is currently a member of the Irodori project. She is picking nandina at a field close to her house and packing the products. Her doctor also recommends that a small exercise is good for her rehabilitation.

She reflects on the project: "This is a real welfare. People should know that I am practicing a real welfare. The nursing care station is of course necessary for those who really need it, but, in reality, a majority of people go there even though they don't really need it."

Young People Come to Support the Town

When Mr. Yokoishi came to the town 30 years ago, Kamikatsu was an extremely closed community. However, after the success of the Irodori project, many people came to visit the town from the outside and the Kamikatsu people have gradually become open to them.

Among the visitors are many younger people. The young visitors can be classified into two types: 1) the U-turn people, that is, those who once left but return to the town after several years and 2) the I-turn people, that is, those who move to the town from urban cities. According to the town council, the total numbers of U-turn and I-turn people during the period 1985-2005 are respectively 126 and 58, of which 85 and 49 are still staying. They occupy 6.4% of the total population of the town.

Some of these younger people moved to the town because they got interested in the volunteer activities coordinated by an environmental NPO. Others are also concerned with the environmental problems in general and sympathetic to the local initiatives on that issue. They drink with the local people and join local festivals and sports activities.

Yokoishi evaluates these younger people positively. He says: "The younger people come to Kamikatsu because they believe they have certain social roles in this town. They are enthusiastic in having relationships with the local community. The elderly women in the town also say that they'd love to work with the people from the outside. Besides, the young people from the outside have a highly sophisticated communication skill. That's the most important skill for developing corporations and organizations."

Outsiders Take Innovative Initiatives for Local Development

Prof. Hisashi Nakamura, an advocator of localism as well as an economic anthropologist who often visits agricultural and fishery villages in Asia, argues that it is those who had once left but returned to their hometowns, who can take innovative initiatives for local development. For local community to gain autonomy and overcome the modern model of economic development, such "outsiders" must partake in local project as equal partners.

Today, a zero-waste project is ongoing in Kamikatsu. It is quite difficult to know whether the project succeeds. However, the fact that local NPOs and the residents of different generations are cooperating with the local authority can be highly appreciated. This strong sense of social bonding and mutual cooperation among local people is what the Irodori project has achieved during the past 20 years. The project is producing an environmentally and socially virtuous cycle of sustainable local development. That makes the elderly women active and vibrant.

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