The Significance of the Tokushima Local Government Conference - National trends aiming for regional autonomy

The Local Government Studies Society（hereafter refer to LGS, https://www.jigaku.org/）, which was organized by Akira Tamura and others, held its annual conference in the summer of 2024 in Hioki City, Kagoshima Prefecture, a city with a population of just under 50,000. LGS, which was established in 1986, has been active for nearly 40 years. The purpose of LGS is to provide opportunities for local government workers, scholars and citizens to exchange experiences and conduct policy research, which is necessary for local governments to proactively tackle local issues. Since LGS started, members of LGS are keen to attend various meetings and the annual conference, where they can share their experiences. In any organization, employees who aim for organizational reform are minority and become sometimes to lose motivation. Besides a sense of practice in administration, it is also essential to be able to review local governmental work scientifically and objectively. Taguchi has been a member of LGS since its inception, and even after leaving local government, he hopes to advocate young generations of LGS. (Toshio Taguchi, Vice-president of Akira Tamura Memorial-A Town Planning Research Initiative NPO)

Introduction

From August 6th to 8th 1987, the Tokushima Local Government Conference was held in Tokushima City over a period of three days, with the theme of "regional independence". The content was divided into three conferences: the first day was the "Tokushima Forum" (research presentations and discussions on "Building Tomorrow's Tokushima" by Tokushima City's independent research group, the Tokushima Junior Chamber, and members of the Tokushima Prefecture Association of Architects and Building Engineers), the second day was the "fourth meeting of the Local Government Policy Research and Exchange Meeting (hereafter refer to LGM)," and the third day was the "first meeting of the Local Government Studies Society (LGS)." There were 653 participants. The Tokushima Local Government Conference was a great success, with passionate discussions taking place.

The three conferences taken together over the three days are collectively referred to as the "Tokushima Local Government Conference". However, some people may have been a little confused as to why there were three conferences. The three conferences were not held separately and then coincidentally held together, but the three were organically linked to each other and there was a necessity for them to be held together. So, if you look at it in a simple way, you could say that the Tokushima Conference of Local Governments lasted for three days. The Tokushima Conference of Local Governments was organized by its executive committee (chairman: Shigenori Omatsu, assistant professor at Tokushima University), a joint effort between Tokushima city, LGS, Tokushima prefecture, the city mayors' association, the towns and village heads association, the Awa system research institute, the Tokushima junior chamber, and the Tokushima prefecture association of architects. This committee was responsible for the overall management of the three parties, and the overall theme was "regional independence". This was a theme that ran through the three days of the conference.

In addition, the great support we received from the members of the city's voluntary research group was also a great practical strength. This is also a living testament to regional independence. However, why three conferences? What is the difference between them? And why was it decided to hold them as a single conference?

1. Three conferences
(1) Conference on LGM
The core of the three conferences was the Conference on LGM. The first of these conferences was held in Yokohama in October 1984. Since then, the conference has been held in Saitama and Hyogo prefectures, and this year marks the fourth time it has been held. The first three conferences were hosted by prefectures, but this year's conference is being hosted by Tokushima city, and as such, it is emphasizing a different regional character and practicability compared to the previous three conferences.

Creating attractive and unique local communities, local governments must shed their role as mere administrative bodies at the end of the line of central government ministries and agencies, and become policy-making entities with their own policies. This will lead to the creation of attractive, non-uniform regions. If local governments are to become policy-makers, they must acquire their own "policy-planning capabilities" and flexible "policy-execution capabilities" that are not bound by old practices, while also reforming administrative techniques.

As research into local government policies is only just beginning, the exchange of research experience is important. This is because it will help us understand the national trends in policy issues and improve the quality of policy research. In the morning, Tokushima City Mayor Shunji Miki gave a keynote speech entitled "Strategies and Actions for Regional Development Aiming for the 21st Century". He explained the strategic project concepts and development measures currently underway in Tokushima. This was a policy concept for regional independence that was appropriate for the start of the local government conference.

This was followed by a panel discussion on the theme of "Policies Aimed at Regional Independence and Private Sector Participation", with four local government leaders as panelists: Mr. Takeo Kurosawa, the mayor of Ueno Village in Gunma Prefecture; Mr. Shibata Murata, the mayor of Osako Town in Iwate Prefecture; Mr. Kengo Tamoto, the mayor of Obihiro City in Hokkaido; and Mr. Shunji Miki, the mayor of Tokushima City. Professor Masaru Nishio of Tokyo University served as commentator, and I served as coordinator. The participants came from a variety of different regions, including Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kanto and Shikoku, and from a variety of different types of local government, including prefectural capitals like Tokushima, as well as cities, towns and villages. The discussions mainly focused on topics such as "industrial development", "local culture" and "human resource development", but in all cases, the participants talked about their practical experiences of local management aimed at regional self-reliance, rather than the conventional, formulaic framework of government.

This was the first time that the four LGM had brought together only the heads of local governments, but they told powerful stories based on their own specific experiences. In the afternoon, there were presentations, reports and discussions involving local government officials, as well as members of the Junior Chamber International and university professors, as has been the case in the past. In principle, LGM is a meeting between the relevant departments of local governments, or in other words, a meeting between organizations. It is finally recognized that if local governments are to become independent, they must formulate policies and conduct research by themselves. The first conference, held in Yokohama, was extremely enthusiastic.

(2) LGS
During the first LGM, there was a call for the creation of a "LGS" that would be open to anyone with an interest in local government and that would allow people to participate as individuals. While it is easy to maintain and stabilize exchanges between local government organizations, once an individual staff member leaves their post due to a personnel transfer, they may lose the opportunity to participate. Research into local government policy should be something that can be continued anywhere, not just in a specific section, but once a person is assigned to a particular role, this is not possible. In addition,

when local governments having the ability to formulate policy, it is necessary for many staff members with the necessary skills to be trained in various places.

Furthermore, research into local government should not be limited to local government staff, but should also involve academics, researchers and citizens. For these reasons, the need for a local government studies society that includes new citizens, scholars, researchers and staff has been called for, including whether local government studies can be called a discipline.

At the second Saitama Conference, a preparatory meeting for the establishment of LGS was held with around 70 local government staff members, and afterwards, calls were made to various quarters. As a result, on May 23, 1986, LGS was established in Yokohama.

Unlike LGM, this academic society is an organization for individuals, not an association of organizations. Individuals can participate regardless of their position or the local government they work for. Naturally, LGM was mainly made up of local government organizations, and the participants were mainly local government employees, but LGS is made up of academics, researchers and citizens.

LGS aims to create a new, comprehensive academic discipline, and is also an attempt to connect academia and practice. It breaks down the barriers between academics, researchers, citizens and local government employees. This is an academic society like no other.

There have been many attempts to create interdisciplinary academic societies that connect different academic fields, but LGS is not only aiming to create an interdisciplinary academic society, but also has a grand vision to explore the potential for new, living academic disciplines and to build them in an unprecedented attempt centered on citizens and practitioners.

However, despite the grand vision, the reality is that local governments are still in a state of immaturity. Even though individuals are the main players, unlike academics and researchers, local government employees who conduct academic research are not given sufficient recognition or credit for their work.

This led to the idea that it would be a good thing if more people could participate by linking LGM, which is made up of people involved in the policy research of local governments, with LGS, which is a conference for people researching local government. Even though companies and academic societies are separate, many of the people who gather there are interested in both. It was decided that it would be desirable to continue to hold these events in conjunction with each other, given the relationship between the two. As this was a gathering of people from many different regions, it was better to give as many people as possible the chance to attend, and it was also better to have as many opportunities as possible to consider the issue of local autonomy.

(3) Tokushima Forum
While the conference in (1) and the academic conference in (2) are on a national level, when considering the issues of local government, it is necessary to tackle specific issues in a particular region, and through this practice, research is carried out and scholarship is developed. In addition, objective ideas and methods should be put into practice in specific regions, and through this process of repeated trial and error, they should become something that belongs to the citizens and the region.

For this reason, there was a desire to make use of the opportunity to hold the conference in Tokushima to present the research of citizen groups that are researching issues such as urban planning in Tokushima City, as well as the independent research groups of local government employees. It was only natural that the people of Tokushima should want to consider specific local issues, and this is precisely the issue of local autonomy and the self-reliance of the Tokushima region. So, with the people themselves taking the initiative, the Tokushima Forum was held under the theme of "Let's Talk about the Tokushima of Tomorrow".

The local government employees were there as members of a voluntary research group rather than as representatives of their workplaces, and the fact that groups of citizens such as the Junior Chamber International and architects also took part in the event can be seen as a first step towards the establishment of a profession in the field of local government studies.

Of the three-day conference, the "LGS" was a broad-based event that included citizens, local government employees and researchers, while "LGM" was primarily a gathering of organizations related to local government. On the first day, the regional research group, which was limited to the Tokushima area, and the vertical front were three different meetings, but participants could freely participate in any of them, and in terms of considering "autonomy of local governments" and "autonomy of the region", the three were common. The number of participants in the local government association alone exceeded 500, and the total number of participants over the three days exceeded 1,500.

2. The need for regional autonomy

Just before the Tokushima Conference, the Fourth National Comprehensive Development Plan had just been announced.

There was discussion about the excessive concentration of population in Tokyo, and there was a consensus that the aim should be to create a multi-polar, decentralized national land. However, the measures being taken to achieve this were not sufficient.

If a multi-polar, decentralized system is necessary, the only way to achieve it is to establish independent regions in various parts of the country. If we continue to rely on Tokyo and follow the trends of the times, the concentration of everything in Tokyo will only continue to increase, and we will never be able to achieve the balanced development of the land that the Fourth National Land Development Plan talks about.

What we mean by "self-reliant regions" is not the issue of moving the capital, which is being discussed today, or the decentralization of some of the ministries and agencies, or the railway and road networks, but whether self-reliant local government has been established in the regions. It will also be necessary to have people and systems that can govern their own region.

It will not be enough to simply carry out the administrative work prescribed by the national government, as is the case with conventional local governments. It will be necessary to have the ability to actively think about and put into practice solutions to problems. Of course, it is also necessary to correct the current flaws in the system of local autonomy and its administration, and to establish a financial and administrative foundation that will enable more independent local autonomy to be established, but above all, the region must have the awareness and ability to be independent. Even if there are a few flaws in the system, if there is the awareness and ability to be independent, it is possible to achieve a great deal even using the current system, and the achievements of independence will also lead to the power to change the system.

The Fourth Comprehensive National Development Plan also touches on the autonomy of local governments, but true autonomy and independence are not possible if you have to be told by others. Both autonomy and independence begin with standing up on your own and governing by your own strength. It is also fine to make use of existing systems and policies from the standpoint of an independent region. However, rather than being used by the system, the region uses the system. There may be various problems that arise, and you may face difficulties. At that time, it is best to continue to move forward on your own, but after efforts made, it is also fine to ask for other people's cooperation. If you have the spirit of independence, you will be able to obtain cooperation at some point. The system will also have to change.

In truth, only the people of the region can understand the region. Even if you can receive advice and cooperation from other places, the actual situation in each region across the country is different, and things won't progress in a uniform way. What is needed is management that is suited to each region and makes the most of the region's strengths. For this reason, too, it is vital that local governments become more independent. If regional development is carried out in a uniform way that ignores the actual situation in each region, the whole country will become uniform and lose its individuality. This would lead to a concentration of power from small to medium-sized and then to large-sized businesses, and in the end, to a concentration of power in Tokyo.

Promoting decentralization, each region must demonstrate its own unique characteristics and qualities that are not found in Tokyo, rather than simply imitating Tokyo or being a second-rate version of it. For this reason, local governments must be transformed from mere administrative bodies into regional producers and regional management bodies.

Now, such independent regional movements can be seen all over the country. In particular, the "One Village, One Product" movement advocated by Oita Prefecture Governor Hiramatsu and the "Japan's Best" movement proposed by Kumamoto Prefecture Governor Hosokawa are well known, and they are strengthening regional independence and self-sufficiency in their own way.

However, these two are not the only examples of autonomous regions. As was seen in the discussions between the leaders at this conference, autonomous self-government is also growing in Hokkaido, Tohoku and even in the small mountain villages of Kanto.

The leaders of Tokushima city, Obihiro city, Osako town and Ueno village, who attended this meeting, spoke about the realities of their autonomous management through their words.

There are various types of independent regional initiatives, including those led by local government, those led by local private organizations, and those led by citizens. It is futile to argue which are good and which are bad. Each region has its own particular circumstances. There is no single answer.

In the case of Ikeda town in Hokkaido and Oyama town in Oita prefecture, the local government was the driving force. In these small municipalities, the local government demonstrated its effectiveness as a place for the local community to come together, and the leaders who came from the private sector demonstrated their leadership skills.

Examples such as Yufuin town in Oita prefecture and Obuse town in Nagano prefecture were led by the citizens. One person, such as the mayor of Obuse, gradually persuaded and involved others. Even though the scale was small, it showed that it was possible to create an excellent space that was independent and could be used for events. The strange name "*Obuse-kei* (brand)" was also an idea that did not come from the government.

There are many other examples. However, it does not matter who starts it. It is good if people who think about and put into practice regional independence can get together. Ultimately, this will lead to a situation where citizens, organizations, the government, and businesses are all connected.

3. The Significance of the Tokushima Prefectural Government Conference
At a time like this, the Tokushima Prefectural Government Conference was held. Until now, meetings of LGM have been hosted by prefectures, and moreover, they have been prefectures that belong to a metropolitan area block. However, the fact that this time it was held in Tokushima City, a prefecture in Shikoku with a population of just over 250,000, and not in a major metropolitan area, is significant.

Regional independence is more necessary in rural areas, and the fact that a conference of this nature was successfully held at the city level, rather than at the prefectural level, shows that the region has the power to do so, and can be seen as proof of regional independence.

What's more, the first conference of LGS was held in Tokushima, Shikoku. Usually, academic conferences are held in large cities such as Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka and Nagoya, and it is common for them to be held in these cities for years before finally moving to the countryside.

In contrast, the first meeting of LGS was held in a city with a population of 250,000 and considerable distance from the Kanto region, which is not necessarily convenient. The fact that LGS, which grew from the grassroots, held its first meeting in a medium-sized city in the region was significant in terms of promoting the character of LGS, which is rooted in the region

Holding a conference with a total of over 1,500 people over three days, even if the conference is held over three days, a considerable amount of behind-the-scenes work is required. The fact that Tokushima City was able to achieve this with the cooperation of many volunteers, including Mayor Miki, is proof of the autonomous capacity of the local community. Without such knowledge and ability, it would not be possible to hold a conference like this.

Compared to a few years ago, or even 10 or 15 years ago, there is now a definite increase in the number of people in the region who have a sense of independence and the ability to act. This is not yet generally recognized. It is being introduced as a few special cases, but I would like to see it as a definite accumulation of the region's potential power. The Tokushima Conference was one such manifestation. I think that now we can really feel that the independent cities that were once unthinkable are starting to move.

Everything cannot be praised without reservation. Furthermore, LGS has only just held its first conference, and as it is a conference of a new kind, with a multi-faceted and multi-layered approach, there were many points that were insufficient in terms of content and management. Also, how to make the most of the freshness that is characteristic of LGS is a challenge for the future. Although new initiatives such as town watching were introduced, it is also necessary to have a fresh approach to the conference that is more in keeping with the nature of the conference.

The combination of LGM and LGS is also a first, and there will probably be more trial and error. These issues should be resolved through practical experience. However, in any case, new regional independence and new independent local government are beginning to sprout. It is necessary to nurture them with warm eyes over a long period of time. When different people are gathering, it is natural that there will be differences of opinion, but we would like to use these differences as energy for the construction of a larger circle of local government.

This conference, held in Tokushima Prefecture on the island of Shikoku, was a gathering of people who have confidence, pride and love for the region in which they live, and who are working to develop local autonomy. We hope to spread this voice to more regions.