

Back from the edge, turning a policy for under-populated regions into a border policy

1. Basic perspective on stimulus for Yonaguni

(1) Conceptual shift, from correction of disparities to exploitation of regional characteristics.

Using this YS service, and considering the fact that Japan itself is, in a sense, making a transition to escape a dead end, I am thinking of a personal development strategy for Yonaguni.

As part of this consideration, let's look back on community development in Yonaguni to date.

Community development for Yonaguni to date has been motivated by the desire to correct regional disparities. This correction of disparities is built on the concept of national averaging and uniformity, taking the regional disparities affecting Yonaguni and bringing them to the same average as the whole country. Therefore all demands and efforts to date have been standard and uniform.

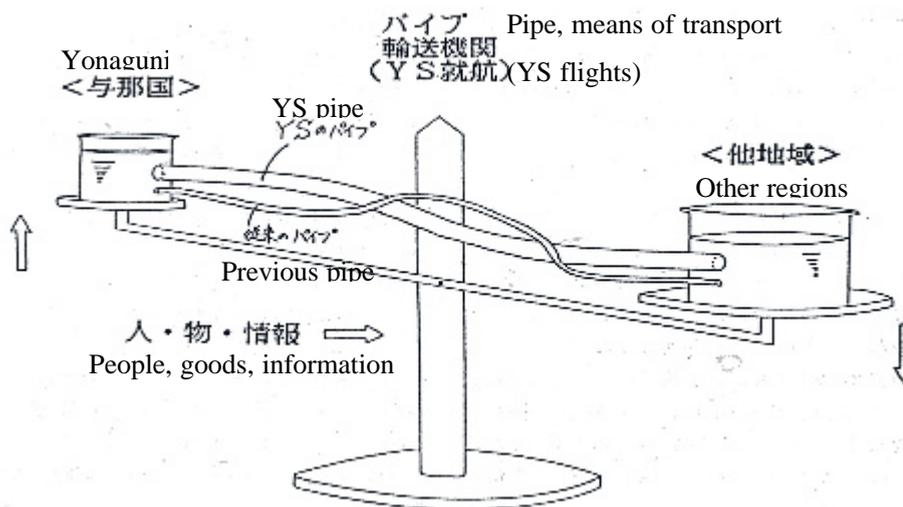
However, Yonaguni is the most remote part of Okinawa. In fact, it is the most remote part of Japan. For example, if the lifestyle of Tokyo residents was taken as the standard for the Japanese mainland, distribution would have to run from Tokyo through the main island of Okinawa to Ishigaki and then to Yonaguni. Transport costs would apply, giving Yonaguni the most expensive living conditions in Japan. This is the view (development strategy) of disparity correction, but that approach maximizes the disadvantage of geographical position. As long as action is based on the desire to correct disparities, this will always remain the most disadvantaged region.

Supposing intensive efforts succeeded in correcting disparities, that would only line everywhere up at the standard level. While that concept is followed, Yonaguni will always be downwind of the center.

What would happen if we looked at regional differences as individuality and special characteristics, rather than as disparities. Individuality and characteristics are things that should be exploited and developed.

From the perspective of correcting disparities, the same regional differences are things to be eliminated, but if they are seen as individuality and characteristics, they should be developed further. Particularly for a remote place like Yonaguni, it is not just a matter of distance, as the climate, topography and culture are all different from central Japan, so there will never be any progress until the old concept of disparity correction is changed to one of regional character exploitation.

Figure 1 Will YS flights be positive or negative for the island (the village) ?



(2) Achieving the “affluence” of the Japanese mainland

So what is the “affluence” of the Japanese mainland, that has been set as the target for Yonaguni to work towards?

Although it didn’t feel real at the time, Japan’s per-capita GNP was the highest in the world in 1986, partly due to the strong Yen. Nevertheless, an average salaried worker seeking to buy a three-bedroom condo apartment in the capital region for ¥18 million, equivalent to three years’ salary, would only be able to afford somewhere with a commuting time of over 90 minutes.

On the other hand, in Belgium, which ranks 16th in GNP, around the middle of the list of developed countries, the same sum would be sufficient to buy a four-bedroomed home within 15 minutes of work. The situation under the strong Yen, where macro-scale prosperity in an economic superpower does not lead directly to an affluent standard of living, can only be called a poverty of policy.

The basic approach taken by the First Okinawa Promotion Development Plan, and by phase one of the Second Plan, looked at correcting disparities with the mainland, and Tokyo was the target within the Japanese mainland. But it is not possible, as it once was, to find an answer for the key point of the Japanese mainland, or for Japan as a whole. Considering these problems, we must take another hard look at Japan’s affluence, which Okinawa is being left out of, and at the projects from mainland Japan and Tokyo that are meant to bring in that prosperity.

Local authorities are scrambling to avoid missing out on the various projects being launched by ministries and agencies, and are creating a regional version of the state. Of course, Okinawa is no exception, and as the prefecture furthest from the center, it is even keener.

Okinawa’s anxiety to avoid being left out of projects that come from Tokyo and reflect the trends of the times, such as internationalization, population aging and shift towards a service-based economy, comes across with painful clarity. But will these projects, which appear, at first glance, to reflect Japan’s affluence, succeed in bringing real affluence to Okinawa?

(3) From the perspective of island (village) development and planning

As I mentioned under “achieving affluence”, Japan is now approaching a major transition period. The macro-scale prosperity seen in the strong Yen has delivered almost no benefit for prosperity at the micro level, or for the lives of ordinary people. That is the macro-economic perspective.

The exploitation of regional characteristics theory, derived from the regional characteristics of Yonaguni, comes from the micro-economic perspective.

Where should we look for a basic perspective on regional promotion for Yonaguni that draws on both these perspectives?

The first step is to put community development and regional promotion on a new footing, based on island development, village planning and town planning, so we can rethink the meaning of development. Island development and village planning should not entrust the future of the region to central or external forces. Instead, we should find for ourselves the inherent possibilities of the region’s culture and way of life. Community development and regional promotion are, at heart, no more than drawing out the latent potential of a region.

In the past, community development and regional promotion often consisted of policies that relied excessively on external forces, such as attracting subsidies and businesses. As a result, efforts to promote the region were not always productive, and a considerable number of cases actually depressed the vitality of the region.

Furthermore, this kind of externally-dependent regional promotion aimed to form uniform, generalized regions, and rarely contributed to the formation of appealing towns with character. Reflection on this pattern has generated momentum for regional promotion through stimulus for the potential of local industry, culture and education.

For example, even if a company is attracted to the area, it is important to start by showing the local people an image of how the region should be in future and go on to accept companies that fit the region’s policies. As for subsidies, rather than throwing the money at isolated projects with the sole purpose of using subsidies, projects should be placed in the context of a comprehensive town plan and put to good use with a sense of ownership.

All sorts of ideas and innovations can be used in administrative plans, and it is important to apply them flexibly. This attitude will positively reflect the sentiments and ambitions of the administration and of the citizens who participate in it. Plans will show strong feelings of “right for here” and “reflecting local character”. They will not succeed without assertion of feelings such as “this is ours” and “right for the region”.

2. Grand design for the living and cultural environment.

(1) From regional disparities to regional characteristics

It is not a simple certainty that regional disparities will change themselves into characteristics.

They will not turn into characteristics before a comprehensive grand design is drawn up that can make the most of the economy, society and way of life of Yonaguni in connection with its nature and land and the characteristics of its people. The characteristic theory becomes valid when the way of life, modes of production and the systems that support them, are fully integrated into the culture.

The concept of culture, as used here, is extremely broad, but we will define it as follows. “The systems of a way of life that is acquired and has formed historically, and is shared by the members of a group”. To put it another way, it is a way of life and a way of living.

The local community is the foundation of this kind of culture. Furthermore, the community is built on human work, and people who are separated from their community lose the foundation of their way of life. Human work goes on within the community, so it is important to have an organic linkage between nature and life and industry, within community units.

In considering local communities, we must look broadly at the linkage and balance between nature, in the shape of ecosystems, local society, and industry.

(2) Nature, way of life, industry

Sustainable, long-term human life will not be possible if nature is not preserved. Artificial management is necessary for that preservation of nature, and costs and labor must be contributed to that management. Natural resources must be used in line with industrial policy, with ongoing management of nature. What is known as local resource exploitation industry, which blends industrial development with ecosystems, is attracting attention. Appropriate use of natural resources on the basis of industrial policy enables the renewable production of natural resources, resulting in the conservation and restoration of nature. Besides industry, built facilities such as town halls, meeting halls and schools must blend into nature, functionally and esthetically, in which case they will contribute to the formation of a comfortable cultural environment.

In a time of chaotic industrial development, the cultural environment of the community must be formed by the autonomous and proactive intentions of its people. In short, a grand design for the living and cultural environment, as shown in Figure 2, is essential.

The most important thing for devising such a grand design is to start from a knowledge of the flow of life and culture in the community. I won't go into details here, but a grand plan for the living and cultural environment must be devised as a total system, covering dietary culture, annual events, local industries, folklore and the like.

(3) How to promote living culture

In the past, culture promotion was taken to mean the preservation of cultural assets, or the construction of cultural facilities such as museums and exhibitions, and projects built facilities as a way of using the benefits of crafts and culture to close regional disparities.

Thus culture promotion projects were based on correcting disparities affecting regions less favored by crafts and culture than the center and the big cities. This is the idea of eliminating “cultural backwardness”. Of course, the building of these cultural facilities did contribute to some aspects of regional cultural promotion.

However, what is important in promoting local cultures is that it is not confined to the narrow definition of art and music, but extends to the whole range of cultural activities, including festivals and events, local history and traditional folklore, the development of special local produce, unique dishes and processed foods, handmade theater and music festivals, tree planting and street preservation. Living culture promotion should target all these things. Given this kind of conceptual shift, Yonaguni has a wealth of material that other communities in Okinawa, or even nationwide, should envy.

If cultural facilities are based on this kind of concept, they should be designed, located and used with an awareness of how they will relate to the everyday lives of local people. Cultural facilities impact their surroundings, and if they are not based on the strategic concept of changing the surroundings into a cultural space, the facilities will be isolated, separate from people’s perception of their own lives.

Efforts are needed to make surrounding spaces, such as roads leading to community halls and other such facilities, into cultural spaces. If the basic concept is to use the construction of cultural facilities as a fulcrum for the creation of cultural space in the community, it is only natural that the relationship between these facilities and the lives of the townspeople must be considered and methods adopted that reflect their views.

The basis of this concept is the expression of people’s diverse cultural aspirations. Discovering what one has inside and expressing it to the world brings joy, and such activities bring satisfaction and relaxation in daily life that come from nowhere else. This is a way for people to express their own characteristic lifestyles and ways of making a living, and it can be integrated into the grand design for the living and cultural environment.

Figure 2. Grand design for the living and cultural environment.

	Nature	Life	Industry
(1) Eat			
(2) Wear			
(3) Live and Relax			
(4) Play			
(5) Study			
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(6) Live(Summary)			