

## **A Case Story from Minamata: GNH Practice as Human Security and Sustainable Development**

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### **Introduction**

I was born in Japan in 1962 and received education from the primary school to the university in Japan. History classes taught me of the rapid economic growth and transformation that took place after World War II as one of the best cases in the modern world. In 1955, the per capita GDP for Japan was about half a million yen and it reached above 4 million yen in 2005. School enrolment rates for high school and university have risen and life expectancy at birth has become one of the longest in this world. Japanese seem to enjoy and be satisfied in their lives. In textbooks of Japan, many have pointed out how miraculous Japanese economic development has been for more than forty years by referring to the successful companies such as Toyota, Sony, Panasonic, and so on. However, this industrialisation has paid huge costs for the society.

In 1956, a strange disease was found in Minamata-city located in the west coast of the southern part of the Kyushu-island where some people became seriously ill. The cause was organic mercury which had been accumulated in fish and shellfish caught in the Minamata Bay where one big chemical company, Chisso, which had produced acetaldehyde for economic development, discharged the industrialised waste for many years. Those who constantly ate fish caught in the bay became victims of the polluted fish.

After this problem was identified as the Minamata disease, local people were hard hit by the disease, which caused stigma from outside the city and internal conflicts among the local people. These troubles were partly due to the fact that the company that caused the disease had hired many local people as

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factory workers, close to 20% at its peak, and local retail sales depended on the company as well. Those who worked for the company did not want to lose their jobs, thus, the incidence of the disease was reported lower than the real number of cases.

There arose conflicts between victims and the Chisso over the recognition of their responsibility and compensation issues. In addition, this has created un-evidenced stigma among the Japanese people against Minamataans, with the mystified Minamata-disease believed to be a local infectious disease. Thus, passengers in a train in the line passing through Minamata city closed their windows once the train entered the city. On the other hand, those who were born in Minamata originally, tended not to identify themselves as people from Minamata, in fear of the people's reaction to the city and them. Some people faced discrimination over marriage due to this stigma.

Minamata city is not a unique case in either Japan or the world. Industrialization started in the Meiji era more than hundred years ago in Japan. Industrialization with mass production created enormous social costs – polluted water, soil erosion with fertilisers and pesticides, polluted fishery products. And most importantly the central government led the ordinary people into World War II to secure the resources for industrial-based economic development. My intention today is not to speak about Minamata's misery; rather, I would like to share a story about recent change – good change, which might buttress the pursuit of happiness among local people in Minamata-city.

In 1994, Yoshii Masazumi became the mayor of Minamata-city and he delivered a speech at the memorial ceremony for the victims of the Minamata disease, which was attended by the Environment Agency director-general and the Kumamoto Prefecture governor immediately after he became the mayor. His speech was different from those by predecessors. His message was contrition and apology, and he stated that the city's past actions on Minamata disease had been mistaken and proposed a solution for dialogue as Japanese people did in the old days to solve a problem at the community level. This made a huge impact over the course of the Minamata disease issues. After this speech, various victims groups, which were split against each other over the certified status on the disease and compensation issues,

agreed on the dialogue for seeking a solution for the victims. Citizen groups supporting the existence of the Chisso Company in Minamata even supported for the urgent need of resolving the problem of the victims redress. In 1995 a political solution was reached on redress for Minamata disease victims.

What Minamata city and the people of Minamata have been doing since then is to restore good social relationships, which is identified as one of the core elements of happiness. For this purpose, they have initiated two methods, useful for our discussion on global and local linkage and a method for transformation applicable to middle or post-industrialization.

### **Vision setting—determination to be a model environmental city**

The first one is Minamata city's strategy to become a leading city on the environment, since the city had been labelled as an environment with high pollution-based risk. The city formulated the development plan with the citizen's participation and came up with the environment model city idea. Concrete actions included the sorting of waste for more than twenty categories by local residents, the voluntary formulation of a women's group working on waste reduction, and active participation of the local junior high school students in the waste reduction activities through education and waste sorting work in the streets. The Minamata city government created "Environment Meister" which certifies local people who are selected by the level of significance of their work for environment preservation, as well as healthy food and goods production. For example, one of the criteria is for those who have practiced and accomplished nature-friendly organic farming for more than five years. Before certified as 'meister', some people were ridiculed by others as a freak. However, after the certification, people looked at them differently and rather sought them out for advice on organic farming.

### **Step to link people inside and outside the community – strengthen human bondage and ecological lifestyles**

The second method used in Minamata in its community reconstruction is *Jimotogaku*, a neighbourhood study concept and

method developed by Yoshimoto Tetsuro, one of the key figures in the paradigm shift in the Minamata city. He was a planning section chief under Yoshii, who delivered the important speech; in fact, Yoshimoto is the writer of the speech. This neighbourhood study method is a set of simple tools to learn about their land and people, which Yoshimoto believes that local people think more why their houses were built on the land (normally far from the edge of the river) why trees were planted in one dimension of the house (to prevent strong windows, etc.) if they are given opportunities to think them carefully.

In Minamata, one mountain side community that suffered constant decline in the young generation leaving for cities was consulted by the city office regarding their interest in receiving visitors who come to Minamata to learn about the Minamata disease. This was the start of the Living Museum of the Rural Community in Minamata. At first, they accepted with little enthusiasm, but, after visitors, including high school students from big cities, started to come, some even did home stay, their opinion changed. These outsiders asked the local people many questions on houses, trees, water use, vegetables, rice, cattle, and even cats and dogs. The visitors praised and envied the way of life of the rural community. Local people were shocked to learn that people from the advanced cities, which they always thought to be home to the most advanced and ideal living conditions, admired their village life. They started questioning themselves about how ignorant they were about many issues in their own village. Local people who became local tour guides started asking themselves questions about their village and their own lives. They started their own search for what their community is about, how valuable their village is in their wellbeing, what needs to be done to shape economic life in positive relationship with the natural environment, and for the nature of social relationships and relationships with the local environment. They started *Jimotogaku* with: social and environmental mapping; researching history, tradition, culture, and local customs; researching the production and consumption process in the village; and organizing community discussion forums over the local people's concerns and needs. In 2005, this community received an award from the Ministry of Agriculture as a thriving rural model place. In

Minamata city, there are now four communities implementing *Jimotogaku*. In Japan, this movement is gradually spreading.

### **Conclusion**

In my view, this story from Minamata is critical for us to find a realistic action to change our development direction from short-sighted and confrontational nature of the capitalist economic system to an economic system and practice this is based on sustainability and secured human livelihood.

New and creative indicators have been developed that capture and measure growth from a holistic, sustainable point of view. I believe that now is the time for us to search for existing wisdom from the local and community levels, search for a sprout of ideas and actions for transformation to regain social ties, and search for generating and sharing such knowledge through the globe. It may be critical to advocate these individuals, groups, communities, private companies, and governments as GNH 'meisters', GNH fellows, GNH best practice, GNH companies, and so on. Both the indicators and actions do need to go together to change the world upside down in the near future.