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Linking City and Farm Village :
An Experiment to Rebuild Abundant Farm Community

Hiromichi Kaneko

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1. Introduction

Farm villages have often been placed as an opposite of the cities in discussions. Metropolitan cities such as Tokyo and Osaka are the centers in politics and culture, and major issues for regional communities have become difficult to solve, whether they are political administration or industrial matters.

In farming communities, there are abundant natures, relief and human feelings, things are lost in large urban cities. Still, young people in farming communities are attracted to the charms of urban cities and walk out their birth places. Many farming communities are facing with declining population and ageing.

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When we refer to "the age of local community" or "localism," they should be also takes as a cry aiming at restoration of farming community.

Interests of city residents to the agriculture and agricultural districts rose increasingly in recent years.

Targets of such interests range from preservation of natural environment to production of safe food, biomass on behalf of fossil fuel, and 'life with agriculture' which seeks for healing.

Citizens' farms in vicinities of Tokyo and Osaka are always filled with people seeking to enjoy contacts with the nature, and have a long waiting list.

Through the changes in value judgment of city residents and diversification of life style, relationship of metropolitan cities and farming communities will drastically change. Such a change will lead to a new appreciation of domestic agriculture, and is also a movement to look for a new relationship between cities and farm lands.

Walls which have long separated cities and farming villages will gradually be taken away. Urban planning and construction of living environment in cities will need to be worked out in a united style.

The Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Farming Communities enacted in 1999 defines a farming village as "a community where farming is a living place for residents" (article 5). In other words, farming village is sustainable only if it is maintained as a living place for residents living there. This is a big turn from old Basic Law where farming village is a "place for agricultural production."

Agricultural communities need voluntary conducts and activities to construct farming village as a living place. New Basic law points that building of farming village should aim at: safe and peaceful life, attractive resources unique to farming community, districts where active traffic of people, materials and information, and communities where people can live and learn in active manners. To realize such targets, polity should draw out independent attitudes of farm villages and support.

Agricultural villages are basic part of the Japanese society. Raising personality in the nature in rural community, environmental protection function through maintenance of rice paddy and forests are important elements which contribute to the social stability.

To make use of these functions of rural communities, a comprehensive understanding of nature environment and culture of rural villages as well as agriculture itself will be needed. Maintenance of appeals of farming villages can be discussed on the basis of such understanding.

In this chapter, case studies of voluntary revitalization of farm villages and mutual association of cities and farming communities will be introduced.

2. System of Agricultural Environment Protection

2.1 Farmers' Corporation

City of Taketa, Oita Prefecture, has a population of 18,000, and is surrounded by the outer rim of Mt. Aso. Kujuno district is located in mountainous area, about 30 minutes drive from central Taketa. Grazing land, formerly used as rice paddy, spreads in the valley, and blue soybeans and buckwheat is grown in steep slopes.

Kujuno district signed a contract with the Agricultural Ministry in 2000 under "direct payment system for mountainous farm community." "Direct payment system" is set

up for farmers whose production costs are higher than average due to disadvantageous land location, such as steep slopes where use of agri machinery is difficult. A certain amount of income is guaranteed for farmers under the system, if they agree to maintain farming environment or not to abandon their fields.

"Let's use the grant for offense, not for defense," said Mr. Seiya Goto, who is chairman of successor raising committee in Kujuno. The committee is made from 111 farmers of 8 villages in Kujuno district.

The direct payment covers about 100 ha of farming land in Kujuno, and a total of 21 million yen is paid annually, amounting 105 million yen in five years. The money is almost equal to "home land revival" project which recklessly spent 100 million yen for all local governments under the idea of former Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita. The committee decided to keep two thirds of the grant to spend for processing plants of agricultural produce and sales promotion of them.

Behind the idea is the aging of Kujuno district. In Kujuno, average age is 69, far higher than other mountainous communities. Kujuno is on the verge of extinction unless younger generation will succeed the farming land, and integration of fragmented farm land into larger size will be a good idea to attract "fresh blood," thought Mr. Goto and others. They came up with the idea to manage farming in a form of company organization. Members of the Kujuno successor raising committee will become shareholders, and they trust their farming land to the company.

According to Mr. Goto's scenario, trusted farm land will be separated into "ownership" and "right to use the land." Salaries will be paid to "employees" according to their labor and the size of the trusted farm land. The company will integrate farm land by the unit of "valley," and when the management of the company has got going, they will hire new farmers.

Shares of the company is temporarily trusted to the Kujuno successor raising committee, as the government is modifying the Farm Land Law to restrict entry of corporations into agriculture.

Mr. Goto and others will register Kujuno as corporation as soon as the government deregulates entry of companies into agriculture.

Although a stock company may not fit to agriculture, Mr. Goto says, "Rural villages have long traditions of collective decision-making and common interests. Such traditions have concepts similar to stock company. Therefore, members do not feel reluctance to form a stock company."

The first "valley company" started in May 2001. A total of 5 ha farm land,

formerly used as rice paddy and thicket and possessed by 6 farmers, integrated into two cattle raising farmhouses and grazing land. The only problem was that there was a river right below the land. There was a possibility that heavy rain may wash discharges of cattle into river and the water may get contaminated.

Mr. Goto and others studied appropriate number of cattle to raise in the land, and concluded that 15 cows in 20 ha land will not bring water pollution. In the European Union, appropriate head count of cattle is one per hectare. Kujuno has a stricter rule. Cattles released outside will become healthy and vigorous, and their discharges will fertilize the grazing land. Thus, valley company became useful to protect the environment of Kujuno's farm lands.

2.2 Cooperation with Cities

Another vigor of Kujuno district lies in processing of agricultural products. In Taketa city, there are 13 agri processing groups. They sell such products as rice cakes and tofu in department stores and pilot shops in Oita city, made from local produces. Kujuno agri processing plant joined this group in fiscal 2002.

What is unique about Taketa city is that the city supports projects of Kujuno and other districts in the hope that the success of such projects will contribute to the revival of Taketa city itself.

The beginning of the story is restoration project of Miyase Bridge which was destructed by heavy rain in 1993. Citizens in city and rural areas jointly formed a group to restore the bridge, and the Miyase Bridge was renewed in 1998. Through the project, residents of city and village shared a sense of unity.

A year after the restoration of the bridge, city began to repay to the kindness of the farm village. A shopping district in Taketa city proposed to sell buckwheat as dry noodles in town. Buckwheat was products Mr. Goto and other farmers produced as an alternate agri products for rice, but they were struggling in marketing.

The proposal made Mr. Goto so delighted, but that was not the last offer of support from the town. They proposed to market wheat, kabosu orange, and soybean. They even mentioned to help raise stoneweed, designated as one of plants in the red data book of the Environment Ministry on the verge of extinction. Stoneweed is used for dyeing.

Taketa city government officials say that selling farm produce and other processed goods of rural villages in the city helped city and villages get integrated, and they anticipate

more linkage of two communities because Taketa city as a whole will stagnate unless city and village together think about the future of Taketa. Vacant store space and abandoned farm land in Kujuno are the same "hollowing out," and a system must be established in which the community will take over farm land or real estate if individuals cannot bear the burden.

2.3 Three Hollowing Out in Rural Villages

Three hollowing out are under way in many farming villages: man, farm land, and rural community. Rural villages in mountain areas do not have working places around, and the population of younger generations will decrease while aging will proceed. Depopulation will mean sharp decrease of farmers, and a lot of farm lands are being left untouched. Unless properly maintained, farming land sills sometimes cause natural disaster such as land slide. Abandoned rice paddies will affect neighboring paddies, because damage of irrigation facilities of the abandoned paddy will inevitably give impact to others. Some farm villages lost all of the population, because continuing agriculture became no longer possible.

While a chain reaction of depopulation, aging and expansion of farm land disposal is spreading from low mountain rural area to plains, hollowing out of village is under way as well. The hollowing out is seen in the form of lost function of autonomy in the community. According to a research by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, more than 20% of towns and villages in mountain areas are facing diminishing traditional culture such as village festival and decrease of tradition successors. An increasing number of rural communities do not react to the calling of local government for community activities.

How can three hollowing out be overcome? "Simple succession of local community on the basis of present economic power will never produce new energy," warns Professor Tokumi Odagiri of University of Tokyo graduate school. He says old deadlocked paradigm should be abandoned, and new framework should be created. Kujuno's attempt to introduce corporatization into farming community is a good example.

New paradigm may differ by community. Professor Odagiri points that at least three conditions have to be met. First, the framework should include new sense of value fostered by the community. Second, new entry from outside is guaranteed. Third, human rights, such as medical care for the elderly and education of children, must be secured.

Unless residents cannot find value or take pride in the community they live in, outflow of population will not stop, even if a temporary revitalization of the community is

realized.

Indeed, blocking new entries into agriculture and forestry will lead to no solution to aging of the rural community or abandoning farm lands. It is true that medical treatment, nursing and education are services which are taken care of by local governments. Still, a mechanism is necessary to integrate the community as a whole in order to conduct such services in a more effective manner.

3. Creating a Landscape of Farm Village

Exploring and utilizing "local resources" is a key in awakening self-motivation of local residents. Local resources are natural environment of the rural community, farming ground, forest, river, landscape of the community and ecological system. To lead voluntary actions of local residents, an increasing number of rural districts are organizing "exploration team" to find out local resources which have not been perceived by residents, and extend activities which promote utilization of such resources, preserve local environment through discussions among residents. Preservation of rural landscape is an example of such activities.

3.1 Preserving Village Landscape

Yokaichi-Gokoku district in Uchiko town, Ehime Pref., is known for its row of storehouses over 2 km length along the former Ozu Main Road. Uchiko town government, together with citizens' groups, made efforts in preserving the street landscape. In 1982, the area was designated as preservation district of historic buildings.

Based on the know-how of preservation of Yokaichi-Gokoku, Uchiko town started farm village landscape preservation project, which aims to build by residents an agricultural community with a beautiful landscape.

Uchiko-town proposed creation of village landscape in the second half of 1980s. Setting fiscal 2000 as the target, "Ecology Town Uchiko Plan," a town planning, stated that the plan will pursue preservation or creation of rural environment and landscape unique to Uchiko. Creation of village landscape was repeated in the second town planning which ends fiscal 2010.

"Stone Pave" district, about 12 kilometers away from the central Uchiko, was chosen as a model area of the project. Concerned about the future of the community under

the decreasing population and ongoing aging, a 12-member resident group formed private gathering in 1987 to preserve the environment in the district. Uchiko-town reformed an old farmer house into a private inn, and trusted the management of the inn to the local residents.

"We were trusted the inn, but at first we did not know what to do," says Sadamu Yamada, who was the third head of the private group. While the town government asked to preserve "rural culture," it was residents of urban communities who admire rural culture. Consequently, it took two years for the group to reach a conclusion as to a landscape which they feel beautiful, after reviewing history, culture, and scenery of their community.

The group started restoration of a water mill in the district as the first step of landscaping. Until mid-1960s, there were more than 30 water mill along the Fumoto River which flows in the area. All of them were destructed during the high economic growth period in 1960s and 1970s. None of the member group actually knows the water mill.

They agreed that water mill is an element to make Stone Pave district original. The cost of restoration was financed by members, each paying 50,000 yen. With help of a water mill carpenter, the first mill was completed in 1990.

Other local people in the community, who were first indifferent about restoration of water mill, began to visit the completed mill to polish rice or buckwheat every day. Eventually, water mill became a pride of the village.

Realizing the upsurge among residents over water mill, Uchiko town government built a second water mill, as part of park infrastructure building project. Stimulated by the government's action, the private group constructed the third water mill with a thatched roof, and started marketing local rice polished at the mill under a name of "Water Mill rice."

The number village residents who joined the group increased to 25.

3.2 Philosophy of Residents Crucial

Once activities start off the ground, ideas continually proposed by residents one after another. Stone Pave district had numerous resources; terraced rice fields, roofed bridges constructed back in the Edo era, and some 20 dams made in the Fumoto River. "Residents began to think how to sustain those resources and even transform them into what they believe a beautiful landscape," Mr. Yamada looks back.

Uchiko-town government advised the residents' group a landscaping "based on subtraction." The subtraction method is the know-how on how to maintain the landscape

of a community, and its main strategy is to remove items such as electric wire and freestanding signboards which spoil town view.

Following the advice, "road sign guidance group" of the meeting began to replace metal signs into ones made of wood which better matched the surroundings. Walls of terraced rice fields, once covered by concrete under land improvement projects of the Agriculture Ministry, were changed by piles of stones, its original structure.

Concrete blocks shaped like picture frames have been embedded on both banks of the Fumoto River to prevent land slide, but residents and town government of Uchiko requested to Ehime Prefecture reforms of the slopes on the banks. They made shelves between concrete blocks by wood, and planted broadleaf trees in there. The reform was less expensive than paving the slopes with grasses, and the banks will be lines with trees in years. A flume of concrete tension has been changed into piled stones at the time of river construction works, which reserved a habitat area for fireflies.

Mr. Fumitoshi Okada, former planning section chief of Uchiko-town government, who is now general manager of the Center for Uchiko Town Landscape Preservation and also an advocate of village landscape creation, thinks rural landscape is not just terraced rice fields and forests. "A living mood and local cultural activities are necessary to brighten rural landscapes."

Rural scenery is not made for residents who live in urban areas and visit rural communities occasionally. Priorities should be put on rural landscapes which local residents feel comfortable. To build such scenery, habitants must think and act themselves. Chiyomi Ono, section chief of regional development in Uchiko-town government, says local communities have been made up led by administrative authorities, but from now on, independent farm village designing is necessary. Philosophies in such activities emerge through spontaneous movements in the community.

4. Community Making with Participation of City Residents

Making of farm village comfortable to live in started in a variety of styles, including introduction of stock company and landscape management. However, community making by the hands of residents only is difficult if depopulation and aging are going on. Meanwhile, city residents are increasingly interested in rural villages where natural environment is attractive to them. Although there are still rural communities exclusive to the outsiders, more rural villages are moving to link with urban residents.

4.1 Helper Corps from the City

Oisawa area of Nishikawa-town, Yamagata Prefecture, is an old village known since more than 1000 years ago for ascetics pilgrimage Mt. Yudono, surrounded by Mt. Gassan and the Asahi mountain range. The village is also famous for one of the heaviest snowfall in Japan, which caused depopulation during the economic growth period in 1960s and 1970s. The village had a population of 1,500 in 1954, when it merged with two other neighboring villages and became Nishikawa town. In 1970, the population declined to 900.

The community attempted to recover, such as the opening of guesthouse for ski tourists and snow festival, all failed to stop the depopulation. The number fell to 122 in 2001. Driven by the crisis, residents in the village set up a community building plan and discussed ways to revitalize the village.

In the study of the plan, senior residents turned to the younger generations to compose the plan. They thought there are limits to the ideas of senior residents, and ideas of the younger members are required to produce a community with "dreams." In 1998, a voluntary group named "Let's Bring Vigor to Oisawa" was formed, with members younger than 45 years old.

In 2000, the group recruited urban residents for help in the community. With its 10th anniversary coming, Oisawa snow festival was on the verge of abolishment, as the aging of the residents in the community made it difficult. Senior members were thinking to cease the festival, but the Vigor group proposed to invite urban residents, if running the festival by Oisawa residents alone is so difficult. The group solicited students in Sendai and Tokyo areas to join the festival as helpers. The village could just pay for accommodation, and other expenses to participate in the volunteer event were not covered.

The reaction was more than they imagined. The group was expecting a turnout of 5 or 6, but more than 20 students applied. The Vigor group mobilized the applicants for building snow statues, and the crisis of the snow festival was overcome. Since then, some 30 students came to the Oisawa village every year to help run the snow festival.

Rural community raising movement with participation of urban residents spread into activities other than snow festival help. In the summer, grass cutting force was recruited to preserve the landscape of foothill areas of low mountains near the Oisawa. A total of 150 students joined grass cutting through 2002. Fans of Nishikawa town who lived in Sendai organized a group, "Nishikawa Mate," and began raising buckwheat in a former rice paddy.

4.2 Environmental Reconstruction of Sagae River

The urban resident helper force spurred local residents in Oisawa, as young folks showed interests in the Oisawa community far more than Oisawa people imagined. A variety of activities by residents started.

Oisawa area was active in agriculture movement utilizing local resources. Using formerly rice field, they raised wild vegetables and flower trees. Oisawa cooperative union was organized to sell wild vegetables and mushrooms to tourists.

Revival of traditional events such as Kagura, a Shinto-based music and dance performance to drive away evil spirits, which traces back its history for some 300 years. The performance was restored by a voluntary group and was shown as an event during the New Year season. Another seasonal event, Yamaiokuri, was revived. The event has ceased since 1960s, but was recovered again in 1990.

In the festival, a straw dolly is made to which sickness is believed to be transferred. The dolly is handed over through small units in the town, producing a sense of fellowship through the community. In 1990, a community hall was established, a base for "artisans" who inherit traditional culture such as Japanese paper, Japanese wooden doll, onyx workmanship and dyeing with plants. The accumulation of these activities led to the confidence that the core of the community will not be affected by inviting "support corps" from outside.

"Support corps" stimulated residents' interests to issues such as landscape of farm village and environmental problems. Maintenance of rural landscape by restoration of abandoned farming land is one of the subjects. Due to the aging of the population, half of the farm land in the village was deserted. To preserve the landscape, five farmers formed a cooperative to cultivate buckwheat in the abandoned rice paddies. Separately, rice production began using charcoal to improve soil and reduce the use of agri chemicals.

Voices among residents grew, asking to restore environments around the river. Sagae River, which flows through Oisawa district, was designated in 1995 by the Construction Ministry as the best clear stream in Japan. Many fishing visitors come to the river from Tohoku, northern Japan, and greater Tokyo areas.

Local fishery association raised rockfish and trout, but the increase of fishing lovers surpassed the pace of fish cultivation, and big fish were rarely seen.

Driven by the fear for the extinction of river fish, the fishery association and Oisawa Vigor group proposed a setting up of "catch and release" area in Sagae River where

fished game must be returned to the river, aiming to preserve river environment and coexistence of fish and human. Yamagata Prefecture, local fishery association and leisure fishermen cooperated to the appeal, and an 8-km section of Sagae River was assigned as catch and release zone, the first such attempt in the country.

In the zone, the number of rockfish and trout recovered. Even the size of trout grew larger. Contrary to the initial projection, the number of fishing visitors increased to over 10,000 per year. They dressed in wears for fly fishing, and empty cans along the river sharply declined.

Encouraged by the success of the catch and release zone, residents requested the government to open slits in the soil saving dam constructed in the upstream of Sagae River. If earth and sand are dammed up, stones in the river will decrease in the downstream, which worsens the living conditions for fish. The dam itself hampers fish from going up the stream. Accepting the request, the Construction Ministry started repair works of the dam in 2001 and put slits in the soil saving dam in April 2002, the first such work.

Although participation of urban residents is a key to rural village re-creation, there are few examples. Some villages tried such exchange projects as eco tourism and short-term transfer of students to schools in rural village from cities, but these proved to be burdensome for the rural side. The question is how to build a scheme that will benefit both communities, or how to set up a target which is common for both communities.

5. Farm Villages are Vital Resource

Establishing a firm economic basis is necessary to root farm village as a place to live, and to urge spontaneous movements. Recent cases are direct agri produce stands and processing plants run by farm wives. Other examples are movements to consume farm produce in the community where they are raised, and "slow food." These activities are also seen in urban communities as well.

5.1 Farmers in Kakuda Associates with Chamber of Commerce

It was in the second half of 1990s when the chamber of commerce in Kakuda city, Miyagi Prefecture, started considering use of agriculture as the core of city restoration project. At that time, Kakuda city was languid. Although the city had a population of 34,000, consumers fled to Sendai, which was just about 1-houraway by train. Shopping arcade in

the center of the city lost traffic, and large retailer shop was closed. The arcade was called "shutter street."

The Kakuda city was struggling to face the situation. In 1997, the city received government subsidy from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (the present Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) to revitalize the local community. With the fund, Kakuda city started planning and research on local resources, development of local specialties, and marketing of such products. Initially, the chamber of commerce of Kakuda drew a revival plan with precision machinery industry and tourism industry placed as the core, because those industries were in the city. However, the plan proved to be useless.

The city officials realized that Kakuda is more a garden city than an industrial city, and the resources it can utilize is the farm villages in the suburban area of the city. Harrowing out is a common problem for both central shopping street and rural villages, therefore solution may lie in mutual complementation, officials of chamber of commerce thought. The chamber of commerce then invited farmers to the meeting to discuss revival of Kakuda city. With the participation of agri extension worker wishing to stop decline of farm villages, dietician worried about food disorder, and organic farmers, the committee repeated trial and error for the next three years. Their conclusion of discussion was stated in the report:

In the past, planning of specialties making was targeting the large metropolitan area. But such strategy brought confusions and sometimes just resulted in withdrawal from the market. Therefore, we will seek for association with Kakuda citizens, not those residents outside the city. Kakuda chamber of commerce will shake hands with agriculture, another old neighbor of Kakuda city, and aim affluent food culture for residents of Kakuda city. (from "Rural Village Revival White Paper 2000, edited by National Association of Chamber of Commerce)

The conclusion was that cooperation of commerce and industry with agriculture will bring growth of local economy, and at the same time, revitalize local agriculture.

The first fruit of the cooperation was "Abukuma homemade tofu kit," marketed in March 2000.

The kit, priced at 2,500 yen, contains organic soybeans grown in the formerly rice paddy, wood box made by craftsman in the city, natural bittern and sewing cloth both prepared by local traders. The kit was introduced by local shops, with a PR saying "With the kit, you can make safe, tasty tofu at home."

The consumers' reaction was great. Thanks to the media coverage, inquiries exploded from around the country, and 1,000 kits, the initial target, were sold out almost

instantly. The chamber of commerce had to run around, seeking soybeans, to meet the additional orders.

5.2 Local Joint Sake Brewing by Agri and Commercial Communities

Spurred by the success of Kakuda city, tofu kit spread to other communities in Miyagi Prefecture as well as Oita, Yamagata, and Akita prefectures. Then, consumers and farmers in Kakuda proposed to make second local specialty, following tofu kit. The Kakuda chamber of commerce established a meeting with consumers and farmers "to cultivate local specialties with good quality," focusing on safe and fresh food products.

In April 2002, the group solicited new tofu cooking menu, using soybean grown organically in the city.

The group also held a contest of tofu cooking in the city center, collecting 50 recipes. Recipes with good reputations were added to the menu at a tofu restaurant, a remodeled warehouse, in the city. A citizens' group was formed to discuss old warehouse.

Co-business with farming community began in the restaurants as well. Plum farmers and city's restaurant union jointly held an event to develop new recipe using salted plum. In April 2001, a variety of recipes lined up, using noodles, spaghetti, and sushi. The restaurant union plans to use other "theme items" such as lotus root and rice and invite new menus, hoping to recall consumers flowing out to Sendai back to Kakuda city. Cooperation of rural and urban commercial communities using locally grown food materials also reached to Japanese sake. A group of liquor shop in Kakuda city proposed to brew and sell sake using locally grown rice which uses less fertilizer and other chemicals. Supporters of the idea, including rice farmers, Kakuda branch of agri cooperative, local chamber of commerce and consumers, established a meeting "to produce OUR own sake." The meeting discussed from rice growing method and brewery style to marketing, with the initiative of Kakuda city agriculture promotion corp. The agri cooperative gathered special rice for sake from 1,000 farmers, and brought it to a brewery company in Shiroishi city. The marketing was carried by liquor shops which are members of the Kakuda sake group. In April 2001, four brands of Japanese sake were put into the market. In April 2002, the group marketed another brand which was stored in low-temperature tank.

Tsuneo Abe, counselor of Kakuda city chamber of commerce, says agriculture and commerce fit well with each other, better than he expected. Mr. Abe says he hopes mutual support of agri and commercial communities will lead to ways for both to survive. Rural landscape and green tract of land will be maintained if rural villages can survive as a

place to live in, if the linkage with city communities will successfully strengthen the economic infrastructure of rural villages.

Although a quick linkage of a city and depopulated rural village will be difficult, if there is an intermediate "city with rural villages" like Kakuda, which has both agricultural and commercial communities of good size, linkage will smoothly established.

6. Wave of Development Undermining Rural Villages

A common problem for rural villages around major cities is disorderly development (sprawl). During the bubble economy period of late 1980s and early 1990s, both public and private sectors deforested for real estate development, and high-rise buildings sprang up in the countryside throughout the country. When deforesting is over, real estate development reached the rural villages. New housings shot up with no order. Faced with land reduction policy, falling rice price, and lack of successors, many farmers gave up to continue agriculture, and chose to utilize their land for housing, which destructed small agricultural communities. Some people called these movements as community destruction, not community making.

6.1 Symbiosis Zone Act in Kobe

Protection of farm village landscape and hilly mountain foot from sprawling is a serious problem even for large metropolitan cities which holds rural communities.

Kobe city introduced "Act of symbiosis zone for human and nature" in 1996. The act aims to stop sprawling by setting up a zoning in its urbanization control area.

Kobe is roughly divided into two by Rokko Mountains which run from east to west. The south side of Rokko, facing the Osaka Bay, has long been urban district. Meanwhile, the northern side still maintains some rural communities. Due to the difference, the south side is designated as urbanized area, while the rural areas and forests in the north side are defined as urbanization control area.

Urbanization control area is a zone where property development is restricted by city planning law. However, the restraints are applicable in only construction of a building on the property will inevitably alter the condition of the site. Due to such a loophole, an increasing number of vacant plots are misused as storages for scrapped cars and various materials nationwide.

In Kobe, not a few number of farming lands are converted into storage of scrapped automobiles, as storages can raise better profits than agriculture. To control these conversions, city planning laws and agriculture-related laws are not effective enough. Such was the background that Kobe city moved to enact a law unique to Kobe to bring an order to land use.

What made Kobe different from other local governments was that agri politics division of the city gave serious thought about land use in the city. In general, city planning division is responsible for land use while agri politics division is in charge of farm production. In Kobe, agri politics division, urged by the sense that Kobe's countryside and farm land will be ruined, stepped up along with city planning division. Kobe's act aims "symbiosis of human and nature." Human means both those living in the rural villages and city residents who visit rural villages. Nature means rice fields, forests, rivers, animals and plants. Symbiosis means preservation of agriculture, forestry and ecological system in rural villages. "Symbiosis of human and nature" means, therefore, creation of comfortable rural village environment through sustainable agriculture and farming community.

Kobe's restriction of land use, based on the act, designated most of rural communities, which are classified as urbanization control area, as "symbiosis" zone. The symbiosis zone further grouped into four categories: environment protection, agriculture preservation, village residential, and specific use. Land use within each categories has to be reported to the authority.

The environment protection zone is defined as an area where countryside, river and reservoir surrounding farm land and village will be protected. In the agriculture preservation zone, agriculture will be encouraged. Village residential zone is defined as an area where farmers' housing will be constructed on a planned basis. Specific use zone will be defined into A and B. In Area A, public facilities such as primary and junior high schools are allowed to be constructed, while in Area B, other use is allowed.

6.2 Village Planning with Participation of Residents

The feature of Kobe's city planning is unique in that citizens will participate in land use planning. In the planning, the city government will propose two zone resignations: agricultural preservation zone and environment protection zone. Based on the proposal, a committee, set up by farmers, non-farmers and landowners of the concerned community, will draw a village plan which defines the use of the community. Village resident zone and specific land use zone will eventually be determined by the committee. The invitation of

residents in the local community aims to improve the effective utilization of land.

Facilities to be built within each zone have to follow guidelines set by the Kobe city which outline use of land in each zone. If an application for construction does not suit the guidelines, the city will notify the applicant and make the application public. For example, facilities allowed to be built within the agriculture preservation zone are greenhouse/seedling raising house, livestock barn, and compost shed only. Other facilities, including farmers' housing, are all approved for construction under certain conditions. Constructions of scrap car lot, sand pit or waste disposal site are prohibited.

In the communities where village planning was drawn, number of residents increased who are enthusiastic about agriculture. "This is because residents share a common understanding that an orderly utilization of land is a prerequisite of maintenance and development for agriculture," say officials of Kobe.

Matsumoto district of Nishi-ward in Kobe city is an example of such residents. Residents in Matsumoto decided to stay in urbanization control area, as they feared urbanization of the district will destruct farming community. In September 1998, Matsumoto district made up a village plan which aims to revitalize the agriculture in the area, based on three focuses: farming promotion, environment protection and land use planning.

In Matsumoto district, farmers over 60 who live on pensions are called "3rd category farmers with side jobs," and organized support system by village to maintain agriculture, setting agriculture as part of policy for the elderly. In addition, Matsumoto district opened rental farm space for urban residents and a farm produce store, "Sunflower," run by wives of farming houses.

Meanwhile, Matsumoto district reorganized its neighborhood association, which had been consisted only by farmers since the Meiji era, and invited both farmers and non-farming residents to join the association. In 1990, the district revived commons to financially support the community association, and provided grants to the member groups of village making committee.

The revival of the commons and a dynamic reform of the neighborhood association led the village making in Matsumoto district a great success. These activities put the communities in the district together, and produced an exchange with residents in the neighboring newly developed town. Although it may not be appropriate to call Kobe a "farm community," it is a good model in making a rural community with urban characters.

7. Developing a "Farming" City

The central government has, in the past, proposed a couple of plans to develop local economy. The former National Land Agency, in its Third National Development Plan, proposed a concept of permanent residence, while late Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira's cabinet drew a plan on "countryside city." Following the plans, new cities were developed in the suburbs of Tokyo and Osaka. However, most of such housing development were counter measures for over population in the metropolitan cities. The plans consequently caused disordered land development in rural villages. Zoning is a self-protection steps of rural villages against such waves of development.

Japan's "countryside city" plan is based on the "Garden City" theory, proposed at early 20th century by Ebenezer Howard of England.

Professor Osamu Soda of Kyoto University, who has studied a garden city in Germany, concludes in his book "Link of City and Farm Village" that garden city movements in Britain and Germany look similar but totally different.

According to Professor Soda, garden city theory in Britain has a character of dispersion of London's population and industry concentration. On the other hand, garden city in Germany has priority in the linkage between cities, or between city and rural villages.

Prof. Soda explains that British garden city theory is more "winding up, or passive," while that of Germany is "full-scale, or active." He points that Japan's community planning theory should convert to German one, otherwise "formation of living space that is close and well-built will be difficult."

Professor Soda of Kyoto University says that in the postwar Japan, the relationship of rural village against city has gone through roughly three stages: against metropolitan city, new industrialized city, and garden city. Soda argues that the relationship should move to the fourth stage; an agricultural city. According to Soda, agricultural city is not a metropolitan city, nor an industrialized city. It is not a garden city, either, where interests of urban community is prioritized. Soda says an agricultural city is a core when urban and rural communities will be integrated. In other words, it is formed on the basis of requests from both farm villages and cities.

Forming an agricultural city needs to bring up potential power of local residents which aim to create a new community, and the central and local governments should support.