

Activities for e-democracy in Mie Prefecture

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Executive Summary

E-democracy is the forum and activities where residents participate in the procedure for solving community issues and the administration decision making process through the Internet. Residents, professionals and administrative staff are able to engage in discussions on an equal basis.

In Mie Prefecture, the “e-demo conference room” was established as a specific tool.

This system was designed to encourage the representatives of the participants to be involved in the administration of the e-democracy conference room and to discuss the new functions or rules of the conference room in order to make suggestions for improvement.

The e-democracy conference room has two aims.

The main aim is “enhancement of capability” of self-government.

The other aim is the promotion of “residents’ involvement” in community building.

Regarding these two aims, some outcomes have been observed over the past three years.

In this text, some concrete cases were introduced.

These successful some concrete cases share common factors such as the existence of earnest and serious participants, extension of online discussions to the organization of periodic off-line meetings, and the active participation of community residents, administrative officials and other related parties. Several challenges have also become obvious over the past three years.

Three major challenges are: discussion on the Internet being more difficult than expected, the range of participants not being expanded, and critical remarks against the administration being repeated.

Based on the review of the successes and challenges, we have decided to shift from the virtual conference room system into two new systems: e-comment system and e-monitor system.

E-comment is a system in which citizens can make various proposals through the Internet regarding administrative issues to be solved.

E-monitor is an on-line questionnaire to hear voices from citizen monitors.

The review of the project described above has been made by looking back on the operation up to now and giving consideration to the changing environment such as advances in IT. However, we do not think that this review has solved every problem.

We can be equal on the Net, so e-government has a potential to bring us 'equal and fair society' if the system is designed for universal use. Therefore, we will continue to explore the possibilities of e-government and ensure accessibility for everyone. However, we must consider those who do not have access at the same time. As some people are not willing to use computers, it would be dangerous for the government to shift completely to the technology-based system. A system independent of technology needs to be maintained as well.

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Introduction

Mie Prefecture, with a population of approx. 1.87 million and an area of approx. 5,800 km², is a medium-sized prefecture. Its nominal GDP is 7 trillion 122.1 billion yen (fiscal year 2003) and its budget scale as a local government is approx. 700 billion yen, both of which rank in the middle level. Its middle-level position in a variety of indexes was the reason for the perception of it as a nondescript prefecture.

However, triggered by the election of a reformist governor in 1995, Mie is now known as one of the leading prefectures which has achieved significant success in reforming.

Taking into consideration the effect of globalization, a variety of systems built up in the post-war era in Japan are said to be suffering from “institutional fatigue”. It is generally understood that Japan, which finds itself increasingly incapable of responding to the needs of new era, is now facing a period of substantial transformation. This transformation will also effect the environment surrounding local governments, which are now undergoing a major change. In particular, with decentralization high on the agenda, local governments are under pressure to implement administrative reform. With the rapid progress of IT, it has also become imperative to respond to the IT revolution. As an interface between the administrative reform and the response to the IT revolution, we have taken up e-democracy.

1. Mie Prefecture’s History of Reform and Birth of e-democracy Conference Room

(1) Phase I reform (1995 to 2003)

Upon the inauguration of the Kitagawa administration in 1995, Mie Prefecture launched its reform to switch from its conventional administrative operation centering on execution of work to the one centering on purpose-oriented management. In April 2003, the baton was passed to Governor Noro and under his leadership, further reform has been under way.

The reform in the Kitagawa administration started from the “reform of staff consciousness.” In July 1995, “SA-WA-YA-KA Campaign” was kicked off (SA: Sahbisu, which implies the improvement of public service quality; WA: Wakari-yasusa, which means transparency or to make the public service delivery system more transparent to residents; YA: Yaruki, which is the

high-spiritedness of public officials, and; KA: Kaikaku, which is administrative streamlining and reform). Activities were pursued to change the mind-set of staff and change the obsolete prefectural government culture. As part of this campaign, the “Administrative Operation Performance measurement system” was introduced. It was the first time in Japan that performance measurement was ever brought in for any public administration.

After this, in Fiscal 1998, a 21-item reform package was prepared as the “Administration System Reform” to change the mechanism of the prefectural government administration.

Furthermore, in Fiscal 1999, the concept of the “Japan Quality Award”, which was created under the influence of the Malcolm Baldrige Award” in the U.S., was introduced to promote activities for the enhancement of the quality of administrative management. This prompted the administrative operation to be recognized as “management” and activities were pursued to promote continuous improvement/reform and enhance the quality of administrative management so as to provide the administrative service with a higher sense of value in the eyes of its residents.

This series of reform activities were under the strong influence of new public management (NPM). However, they were not necessarily based upon the principle of market fundamentalism. They should not be described as the introduction of the theory of NPM or foreign techniques, rather as the gradual introduction of reform systems suitable for Mie through a succession of debates in the prefectural government.

(2) Phase 2 reform (2003 to)

With the inauguration of Governor Noro in April 2003, the reform entered a new phase. Its basic stance was to further advance reform with the following new idea while taking advantage of achievements from the Kitagawa Reform:

The Comprehensive Plan for Fulfilling Life in Mie, released in the following year, 2004, set the basic philosophy as “happiness-generating prefecture that inspires prefectural pride built by residents’ initiative.” Its underlying idea is that the public governance must be enhanced based upon the reality that a variety of stakeholders such as residents, enterprises and organizations are supporting the overall public sector.

To proceed with it, the administration had to change itself. The basic concept for the administrative operation was set to be a citizen-centered administrative body. In 2005, based upon the debate with residents, the “Policy for Promotion of New Public Governance” was set. It was decided that the way in which the society is supported by everyone, with a variety of stakeholders participating in activities in the public domain, should be called “New Public Governance” and that the prefectural administration should be changed through the promotion of this concept. Specifically, three activities were adopted:

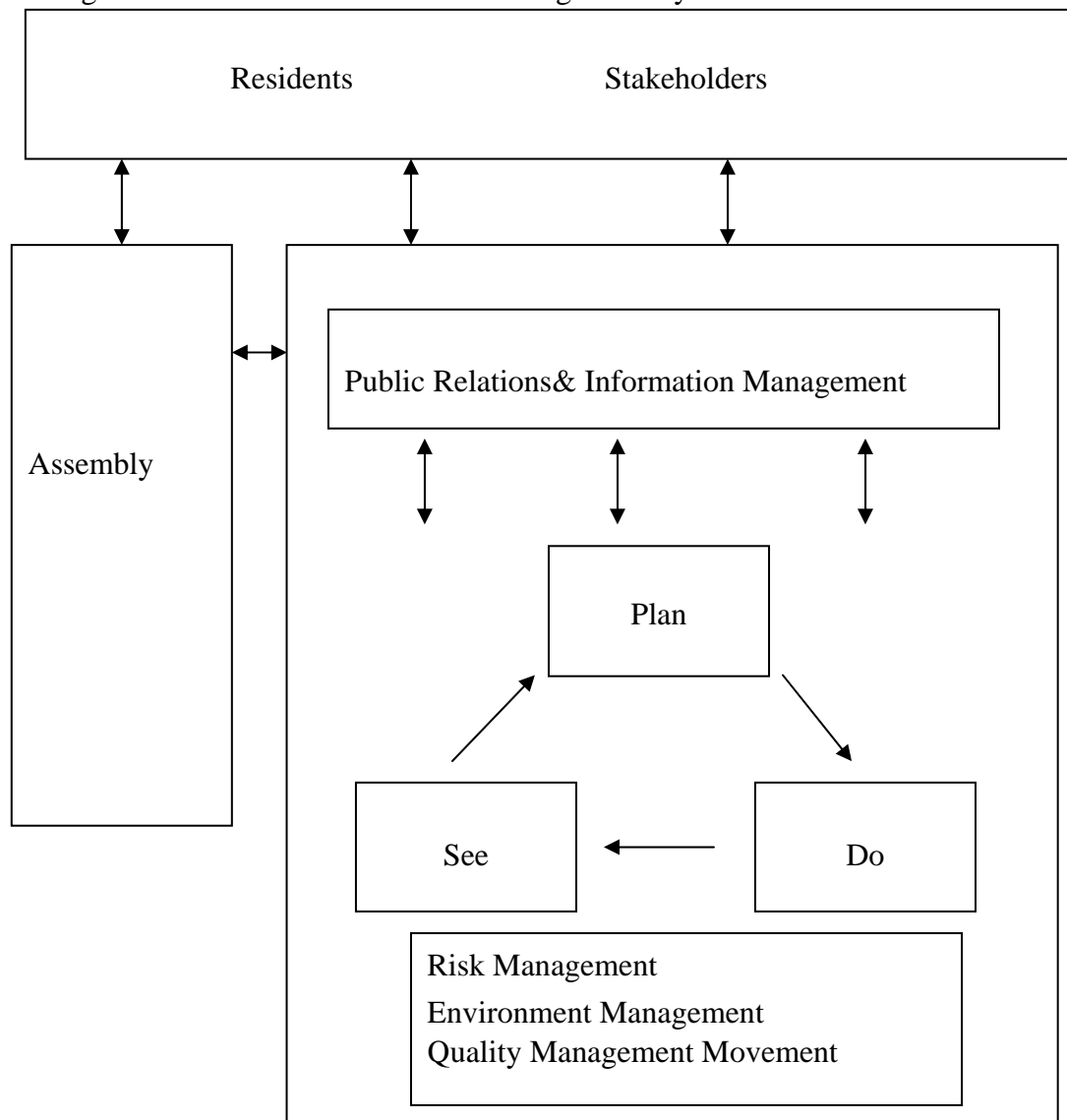
- 1) to call for a wide range of involvement, from the policy formation stage to the evaluation stage
- 2) to promote information sharing with a variety of stakeholders
- 3) to create partnerships with NPOs and with organization likes NPOs to enhance the quality of co-production.

This means that, although it is necessary to reform the public management, it should not be limited to the pursuit of efficiency and that such reform should be proceeded with based upon this concept of “New Public Governance.”

Under such a concept, the importance of the public hearing system that served as interface with residents increased. The “Total Management System” was set in 2004 as a framework for reviewing the system as a whole so that various administrative operation systems could function in a more systematic and effective way. (See Fig, 1) In that Total Management System, the “Public Relations and Information Management” was characterized as a system in which information on administrative operation was disseminated actively to create interface with residents. Opinions and requests from residents were also reflected on during each phase of the “plan, do and see” cycle for each system.

e-democracy can be regarded as the challenge of how to utilize IT for the vitalization of interface with residents.

Fig. 1: Framework of the "Total Management System"



(3) IT revolution and activities of Mie

Around 1995 when Mie Prefecture launched its reform, the Internet was starting to spread rapidly in Japan. With the popularization of e-mail, a new form was added to people's communication method.

Computerization cleared off constraints such as time, space and cost in the interpersonal communication and was to make a major change to people's way of thinking, conventional wisdom as well as life style and behavioral patterns.

To utilize such IT potential for the welfare and service of residents, Mie Prefecture released the “21 Century Mie Information Society Promotion Plan (hereinafter referred to as the “Plan”) in 1997. This was a vision for computerization of Mie Prefecture in which a new community would be formed beyond regional and administrative boundaries through the utilization of information and communications technology from the “quality of life viewpoint” and from the “community viewpoint.”

Based upon the Plan, in order to respond to the trend of IT revolution, Mie Prefecture built an in-house network by distributing PCs to all staff members and connecting them to the network in 2000, ahead of other prefectures, for the promotion of sophisticated and efficient administrative service. IT infrastructure was also aggressively pursued, including the establishment of the broad band network using an existing cable TV network. In 2002, access to the broad band network utilizing the existing cable TV network was made available to any part of the prefecture.

As well as basic infrastructure development the plan also sets out three objectives for the creation of a leading information-oriented prefecture. One of them is to become a leading information democracy prefecture. This requires the establishment of an environment for democratic administration and community building through the participation of residents by utilizing the information network.

(4) Birth and development of e-democracy

In Mie Prefecture, the activity for “e-democracy” was born in the last step of Phase 1 reform. Its birth was prompted when challenges facing Japanese-democracy as a whole were discussed in a group participated by prefectural staff and it was suggested as one measure for solutions of such challenges.

Prior to the reform, it had been rare that a suggestion from prefectural staff led to a specific prefectural project. This is one example in which the reform of staff consciousness, the reform of prefectural government system and the reform for involvement of residents have been translated into a tangible form.

The e-democracy represents the forum and its activity where residents participate in the procedure for solving community issues and in the decision making process of administration through the Internet. Residents,

professionals and administrative staff will be able to engage in discussions on an equal basis. In Mie Prefecture, as a specific tool, the “e-democracy conference room” was established. This conference room takes a form of electronic conference room (bulletin board system) where anyone is free to post opinions and anyone is free to view them.

Why did Mie Prefecture establish an electronic conference room? In principle, community challenges should be solved by resident initiative. Mie Prefecture believed its residents know the importance of consensus building and democratic solution and considered its citizens to be positively involved and interested in community matters. Therefore, an electronic conference room was considered an excellent tool, although there was doubt about its effectiveness in Mie prefecture, and electric conference rooms were seldomly used in other prefecture. In reality, slanderous opinions are rampant in private bulletin board systems and anxiety loomed among the electronic conference room’s supporters and critics regarding heated exchanges between faceless people. Concerns were also raised about how the message board could facilitate fair and balanced discussions without the provision of precise and objective community information. To solve such challenges, the prefectural government decided to provide a forum safe and secure from slanderous opinions even for electronic conference room beginners and incorporate the system to allow information input from the administration.

This was a giant challenge as we were unsure how many residents would get actively involved in this kind of activity. For the e-democracy conference room, the prefectural government provided an environment as one “experimental project” and asked residents to utilize it fully and left its success or failure in the hands of residents.

For that matter, this e-democracy conference room was not intended to be set up and operated by the prefecture forever. As mentioned above, it is desirable that the solution of challenges in the community should be attained in the process of activities by residents’ initiative. Bearing in mind that, if time came when it could be set up and operated by residents’ initiative, the role would be transferred from the public sector to the private sector, the prefectural government decided to aim to provide a system where participants could get actively involved in the operation of the e-democracy conference room to achieve the operation conducted by participants’ initiative.

For example, the system was designed to encourage the representatives of

the participants to be involved in the administration of the e-democracy conference room and to discuss the new functions or rules of the conference room in order to make a suggestion for the improvement.

Thus, the e-democracy conference room started in May 2002. Although it started with three themes, its number of access and postings gradually increased, thanks partly to the effect of aggressive PR. In one year from its establishment, the number of people accessing the system reached approx. 150,000 and the number of postings reached approx. 3,300. It continued to attract attention of residents steadily, and three years later, the annual number of people accessing the system reached approx. 200,000 and the annual number of postings reached approx. 76,000.

In 2004, new themes established to handle administrative challenges called for active resident involvement stemming from the “New Public Governance”(the basic philosophy of new comprehensive plans of Mie). This new view sought positive resident involvement in prefectural administration challenges. Furthermore, the administration aimed to utilize the opinions and ingenuity of residents to better influence the prefectural administration. Those new themes, as many as 7 thus so far, have attracted many new users and postings.

2. Background of e-democracy:

Japanese Democracy and Potential of e-democracy

(1) Japanese democracy and Policy Making

There is a Japanese term, “oyake,” resembling an English term, “public”. Although the translation is similar it has a substantially different concept.

When we look at the last days of the Tokugawa Shogunate just before the modernization of Japan, the autonomy of community was already in a fairly advanced state. Agricultural communities in those days were self governed by village administrators selected from among peasants. Village administrators were elected by vote, etc., convention and rules for the village were decided at get-togethers and expenses required for the operation of the village were borne equally in the name of village expenses. This kind of self-government was “oyake” from the viewpoint of individual peasants. However, it was “watakushi(private)” vis-à-vis the Shogunate and clan government, who were their rulers. In other words, ruling parties were “oyake” and ruled ones were “watakushi” and the concept of public and private was a relative one.

In the Meiji Era, the modernization of Japan began. Although the Meiji Government was eager to take in the Western modern civilization, it was extremely half-hearted about the creation of democratic political system. It was only after Japan was defeated in the Second World War and a new constitution was established, under the instruction of the occupational forces, that democracy became the basis of national administration both in name and substance.

The conventional concept about public and private has created a mindset that the public sector is owned by the ruler. In addition, given the short history of democracy, the spread of democracy in Japan is a little lagging behind. It must be said that the willingness on the part of people to contribute to the public domain is relatively weak. Since it is difficult to think of government or administration as their own, it is undeniable that there is a reality, which is often subjected to such ridicules as “democracy in the discretion of others (democracy left to assembly members after election)” or “demand-type-democracy (in which citizens are “sidelined” participants who always make demands on the government without ever being directly involved).

As mentioned above, since Japan is now facing a transformational era, it becomes extremely vital to form a collective intention about the direction of future public policy. Although residents must set the direction of policy themselves, their intention of getting involved is low on the surface, although it may be potentially high. This must be considered to be a major challenge in the time of unlocking the future.

(2) Consensus building among residents

Democracy is not only intended to respect individuals' rights but also based on the premise that residents adjust their rights, which sometimes conflict each other, on their own responsibility.

However, in Japan, it cannot be said that the “culture of democracy”, such as consensus building through discussion, is mature. Japan adopts indirect democracy with representative democracy as its basis. However, in the representative democracy, once residents cast their votes, they tend to leave the rest to assembly members. This makes it difficult for residents to work up the will of voluntarily thinking about the future of their region, looking hard at challenges and studying measures.

Furthermore, traditionally, Japanese people do not like to assert themselves in their community and there seem to be many people who are not used to making assertion or listening to others' assertion. In particular, in agricultural and fishing villages, where communities have long been operated through family-like relationship, there seem to have been very few cases where consensus building has been achieved through "discussion" among residents.

(3) Limit of direct democracy and potential of IT

For establishment of the "culture of democracy," it becomes vital to decide which means should be used for residents to participate in the forum where community challenges are considered. This requires the incorporation of procedures similar to direct democracy. However, it requires tremendous costs to set up a variety of forums for consensus formation and allow a large number of residents to participate, resulting in a certain limit to the introduction of procedures resembling direct democracy.

IT can clear away, at one brush, time and special constraints for residents to get together in one place and help reduce the cost required for communication dramatically. As a measure for overcoming such constraints, IT has great potential for forming new technique for residents' self-government and residents' involvement.

One of the specific forms is an electronic conference room. It has been expected that an electronic conference room such as the "e-democracy conference room," can, as one means for realization of new democracy, provide a forum for free exchanges of opinions between residents and between residents and administrative officials and exert its function fully.

Local government is said to be a school for democracy. In that sense, the "e-democracy conference room" is, so to speak, an electronic classroom where anyone can get together in this school.

3. Outline of the e-democracy Conference Room

(1) System of e-democracy conference room

The "e-democracy conference room" is an electronic conference room (bulletin board system) set up as a specific tool for realization of e-democracy in Mie. Since residents can exchange their opinions electronically for each theme, it has become a conference room in which

anyone can participate at any time and from anywhere.

(2) Aims of the e-democracy conference room

The e-democracy conference room has the following two aims:

1) Enhancement of Capability of Self-Government

The main aim of the e-democracy conference room is to aim for the “enhancement of capability of self-government.

As mentioned in the section of the challenges of Japanese democracy, the “culture of democracy,” in which residents debate their own problems and try to build consensus, is immature in Japan and residents seldom assert their opinions proactively and participate in debate.

The electronic conference room does not have any time or space constraint for participation. The idea was that if residents could proactively collect information on problems facing the community, assert their opinions and debate with each other through full utilization of this tool, they would become able to judge and decide their own community issues.

2) Promotion of residents’ involvement

The other aim of the e-democracy conference room is the promotion of “residents’ involvement” in community building.

There are many residents, who go to work outside the community in which they live. Because of time constraints, it is difficult for them to participate in community meetings and thus to participate in community activities. Also, there are many people, who are pressed by their everyday life and work and cannot have time for or interest in having a look at administration and community issues.

In addition, in terms of the system, the prefectural government has, as tools for listening to opinions of residents and having them reflected on policies, consultation service, telephone, fax, letters, e-mails, etc. However, these are only for listening to individual residents’ opinions and not for summarizing the voices of many residents and have them reflected on policies.

On the other hand, deliberation councils, review committee, public hearings, workshops, etc. are held to foster debate among residents on specific political issues. However, these deliberation councils are not always

available to residents.

If, by taking advantage of the characteristics of the electronic conference room, anyone can participate any time and from anywhere, interactivity among participants can be secured through the publication of the contents of opinions and the opinions can be consolidated through opinion exchanges among residents, it becomes possible to propose them for administrative policies as a kind of consensus of many residents.

(3) Features of the e-democracy conference room

The e-democracy conference room is operated with the following five features:

1) Appointment of e-Editor

Generally, in the operation of an “electronic conference room,” it is vital to have a coordinator. In the e-democracy conference room” as well, it was decided to appoint an e-editor for each theme.

The e-editor is mainly responsible for “raising issues” in relation to the theme picked up in the conference room in such a way as to increase the interest on the part of participants, requesting the administration for the information necessary during the process of debates and “summarizing points at issues and extracting challenges” while monitoring the development of debate.

2) Provision of information by the administration

This electronic conference room has a system where the prefectural government, upon notification from the e-editor mentioned above, provides information on community issues and others proactively without waiting for requests for the disclosure of information from residents. Also, depending on the contents of debate and status of progress, easy-to-understand information (order-made information) is to be provided in a timely manner.

3) Utilization of Achievements

The achievements of debate in the conference room are utilized by residents who have participated in the debate in their own community. Also, the prefectural administration takes the achievements of debate in the conference room sincerely, characterizes it as one opportunity for understanding main needs of residents and tries to utilize it in a positive manner.

4) Implementation of primary check

With a view to providing a “safe and secure forum” for debate, advance check of opinions by the e-editor is conducted. Although, in principle, postings from participants are made public as they are, there is a risk in which information violating privacy or information containing slander or discrimination may be posted. Therefore, their contents are checked before made public.

5) Link with the function of mail delivery

Needless to say, postings at the conference room can be viewed on the web. However, with a view to better convenience for participants, for those participants who request for mail delivery, every time there is a posting, mail delivery is made to a registered mail address. For that matter, this function can set for each theme and participants can receive mail only for the theme they want to participate in.

4. Results of the Operation of the Last 3 Years

(1) Trajectory of the Operation

The e-democracy conference room started in May 31, 2002, and has had 39 themes set for the past approx. 3 years up to March 2005, which have invited many residents for debate. The themes set have covered a wide range of areas, including community building, environmental problems, education and child-rearing, disaster prevention, welfare and the like. We believe that the themes responding to the needs of residents have been selected.

The cumulative total of the number of access for the corresponding period has exceeded 530,000 and that of the number of postings has exceeded 16,600. These numbers have thrown other local governments in the shade in terms of their own electronic conference rooms and there have been some examples which have brought about the solution of community challenges.

On the other hand, problems that were not expected at the start-up time have occurred and there have been results which have not attained the original expectation. This requires the review of the results of operation and of the future direction.

This section introduces cases in which debate among residents led to the solution of community challenges, and cases resulting in the reflection on the administrative policy as well as challenges which have become

apparent.

(2) Achievements (from the viewpoint of enhancement of capability of self-government)

There have been several cases where community issues were extracted from debate in the e-democracy conference room, leading to residents' voluntary activities toward solution. It can be said that these are the examples that help enhance capability of self-government, which was one of the objectives at the start of the e-democracy conference room. There are a dozen of such cases which have come to our recognition as of now. This section introduces some representative cases from them.

1) Formation of a community-building organization

A community-building organization called "Machi-raku (enjoy the community) Club" has been formed in the process of debate in the e-democracy conference room. In one theme, promotional measures for the center (parks and shopping districts) of Tsu City (prefectural capital of Mie), became a topic of debate. One participant posted a message asking whether there was anything they could do to bring the city back to life.

In response to this posting, an opinion was presented, calling on participants to think together to bring back vivacity to the town and proposing the organization of a workshop.

Many participants agreed to this proposal for this workshop and some of them served as staff to plan and organize the workshop.

It was decided to adopt the technique called "Gulliver Map," in which a gigantic map is prepared for the subject area, spread in a spacious location such as a gymnasium and participants who have actually walked the town, put down on the map what they notice, and know about the town so that the knowledge about the community is accumulated and utilized for the future community building. Since people walking on the map look like Gulliver walking in a small town, it is called "Gulliver Map." This activity group decided to call this workshop Godzilla Map, comparing this to Godzilla walking in the town.

The "Godzilla Map" event, held on October 26, 2003, attracted 120 people centering on the participants in the e-democracy conference room. More than 1,000 items of town information were put down on the map and the event using the information put down on the Godzilla Map was held in the

following month.

Although it can be said that this workshop by participants' initiative turned out to be successful, voices from participants were raised for the need of continuous activities in the future since one-off event was not enough to fully utilize more than 1,000 items of town information collected in the event, leading to the formation of the "Machi-raku Club" as an organization committed to continuous community building, with the Godzilla Map staff and participants playing the central role.

The Machi-raku Club has entered the information put down on the big-paper map on an electronic map for easier browse and access and organizes activities utilizing this information in a continuous manner. Also, whereas the information from the Godzilla Map centers around shops, environment or other "materials," based upon the concept that a town can become a town only after being equipped with people in addition to materials, forums are provided periodically where information on what townspeople are thinking and what they are doing is shown and disseminated.

These activities have been evolving even after two years have passed since the Godzilla map event and all activities are carried out by community residents.

2) Formation of satoyama (community forest) preservation activity group

In Mie, there are many regions with rich nature and many "satoyama (community forest located close to human communities and closely linked to people)." These community forests were frequented by many people for collection of fuel woods and edible wild plants and looked after for preservation of rich nature. However, due to changes in social conditions in recent years, a decreasing number of people visit these forests and thus they are seldom taken care of.

These forests without human care change from sunny wooded areas to gloomy dense forests. There is a concern over possible disappearance of biodiversity and a decreasing number of opportunities for people to commune with nature.

There are many residents who feel strongly about this issue and opinions came from multiple people to the e-democracy conference room as well those that desired to engage in forest preservation activities.

However, the preservation of forest requires proper preservation management skills such as weeding and brushing or improvement cutting. With inaccurate knowledge, preservation activity cannot be performed. Therefore, one participant posted a message talking about lack of knowledge on how to engage in forest preservation activities. Then, another participant, who was actually engaged in forest preservation activities, explained how to carry out such activity in the e-democracy conference room and called on others to participate in the activity together.

Multiple participants in the conference room responded to such a call and started to participate in a forest preservation workshop or engage in joint activities with an existing forest preservation group. While such activities were conducted continuously, a group focused on periodic activity was formed and is still active today.

3) Other Activities

The cases introduced above are examples in which debate from the e-democracy conference room was translated into actual activity, which is still continuing periodically. However, there are other cases where, if not continuously, participants exchange with each other to engage in community activities. For example, in 2004, a succession of typhoons hit Mie, causing major disasters. Their recovery work was supported by many volunteer activities. Participants in the e-democracy conference room were active in afflicted areas and introduced on-site situations and volunteer activities from time to time in the e-democracy conference room. Then, other participants who browsed them, participated in the activity themselves or called on their friends and acquaintances to participate. This served as a trigger for participants in the e-democracy conference room to engage in volunteer activities. Some participants in the e-democracy conference room came to Mie to engage in volunteer recovery activity from outside the prefecture.

There were such multiple transient cases where participants in the e-democracy conference room called on each other to hold small community activities or participated in existing activities. The spread of this kind of development in many directions lead to the attainment of objectives of the e-democracy conference room.

(3) Achievements (from the viewpoint of promotion of residents' involvement)

Cases which have led to residents' involvement in administration, which is the other major objective of the e-democracy conference room come in a wide variety including cases in which debate in the e-democracy conference room was actually reflected on the formulation of draft plan, proposals for administration and cases which led to clerical work improvement.

1) Reflection on the Review Committee for Desirable Prefectural Hokusei-Chuo Park

When the improvement plan of Mie Prefectural Hokusei-Chuo Park was being reviewed, debate about ideal parks was under way in the e-democracy conference room. It was proposed to have a debate over this park in the e-democracy conference room.

Specifically, an experimental approach in which a workshop was held on the Internet, was taken.

As a first approach, participants were asked to contribute opinions about what kind of park they wanted. This was important in order for them to visualize a park which they would consider ideal. Then, information on what the actual Hokusei-Chuo Park was like was given by participants and points at issue were summarized about how to proceed with the improvement plan of the Hokusei-Chuo Park. A variety of drawings and pictures were posted so that participants who had not actually visited the park could also participate in the debate. Also, an off-line meeting was held where participants actually got together in the park to explore the park and report and discuss what was found. The proceedings of the off-line meeting were immediately shown in the e-democracy conference room so that people who did not participate in the off-line meeting could also join the future debate. In the final stage of the net workshop, based upon the points summarized up to then, opinions were exchanged over the theme of "What type of Hokusei-Chuo Park is desired," bringing about many opinions. While submission of the result of the debate to the prefectural review committee on formulation of the improvement plan of the Hokusei-Chuo Park was under consideration, the secretariat of the committee, which was monitoring the debate, moved first and asked the e-editor, coordinator of the theme, to become a member of the committee to introduce the debate of the e-democracy conference room.

This request was proof that the secretariat of the committee regarded the debate in the e-democracy conference room valuable. Not only unilateral

proposal to the committee but also reflection of the debate in the e-democracy conference room on the committee became possible. The e-editor accepted this request readily and joined the committee as a member.

The committee held five rounds of discussion. In addition to the e-editor, the meetings were joined by participants of the e-democracy conference room as observers, who then introduced the proceedings of the committee in the conference room. Based upon the debate in the committee, the e-democracy conference room also held debate, contents of which were then proposed in the next round of meeting in the committee, enabling the discussion to be conducted at the conference room linked with the discussion at the committee.

The contents of the e-democracy conference room, which were proposed at the committee, were highly evaluated in the debate in the committee and in response to such a proposal, it was decided to conduct again the “Natural Environment and Fauna and Flora Study” and “Hearing for Community Activity Organizations.” Also, it was decided that the proposal on the location of facilities and improvement policy should be reflected on the draft plan.

In addition, opinions of the handicapped persons were taken into consideration for the proposal.

Furthermore, around the same time, the reevaluation committee, responsible for judging whether the park improvement plan should continue or not was held. There also, the debate in the conference room was introduced and the activities by local people were appraised and it was decided to continue the improvement plan.

2) Proposal to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology on the lawn of schoolyard.

A news article about the recommendation on the use of lawn for the schoolyards of primary and junior-high schools by the Central Education Council, (a consultative body for the Ministry of Education) was introduced by one participant, which triggered an active exchange of opinions about the pros and cons of lawn in schoolyards, and desirable schoolyards.

Some argued for the benefit of lawn as it is a safe place on which children can play and others argued for conventionally-used earth. Debate was proceeded with in a meaningful way, involving education board staff,

specialists adults and children in the conference room.

In the process of debate, participants of the e-democracy conference room got together to visit and collect information from a school with lawn in its yard within the prefecture. It introduced the opinions of those who were actually playing on the lawn and many other examples.

This active debate drew many opinions and ideas to the e-democracy conference room. Many participants expressed their desire for their opinions and ideas to be introduced to the Central Education Council, which actually submitted the recommendation on the use of lawn, as well as the Education Ministry, which received the recommendation.

As a result, the e-editor and educational board staff played a leading role in summarizing the contents of the debate in the form of proposal and submitted to the Education Ministry.

This case did not lead to any action on the part of the Ministry which received the proposal. However, the contents of opinion exchanges came to be known by many people, leading to higher motivation on the part of participants, resulting in more meaningful discussion after the submission of the proposal.

(4) Factors for Achievements

These major cases, which led to specific achievements as the result of e-democracy conference room, have several common factors.

First and most important was that there were earnest and serious participants. Even when debate is over an important theme, if there are few participants, it is impossible to have meaningful discussion. Even when there are many participants, if they are not so earnest, it could not lead to a fruitful situation.

Participants were not limited to debate on the Internet. They were able to meet each other face to face in off-line meanings and others. Debate only on the Internet has a certain limit, which will be discussed in the section dealing with challenges as well. It is difficult to engage in heated discussion among people who have not actually seen each other before. When debate has reached some point, if participants get together with a common objective, debate after that can become deeper. These kinds of get-togethers cannot be held frequently due to time and space constraints. However, it is recommended to hold them when the need arises, depending on the status of the debate on the Internet. From a different perspective,

it is imperative to have participants earnest enough to actively come to an off-line meeting when it is held.

Next is whether to be able to secure the participation of related parties. Whether any community activity is brought about depends on whether relevant residents are willing to participate and provide community information. Whether it will be reflected on administrative policy depends on whether relevant administrative staffs are willing to participate and provide administrative information. If firsthand and accurate information is not provided by such relevant parties, debate may proceed based upon wrong information, precluding meaningful debate and effective use of results from debate.

Finally, an overall coordination becomes important. Even with earnest general participants, participation of relevant parties and proposal for the organization of off-line meetings, if agenda is not set properly, if proper adjustment between participants and relevant parties or between participants are not made for attracting constructive opinions and if those posted opinions are not summarized succinctly for consensus building, it is difficult to obtain any conclusion. How smoothly these procedures are performed will determine the success or failure of the conference room.

In the e-democracy conference room, this role is taken on by the e-coordinator. However, it is desirable that earnest participants take on some part of the role of the coordinator to prevent any overburden on the e-coordinator and possibly that all participants perform some roles required in the overall operation of the conference room.

(5) Challenges

While specific achievements have been described above, there have been challenges which were not assumed at the start of the project and cases which did not bring about expected results in the past 3 years of operation. This section describes a variety of challenges facing the operation of the conference room.

1) Difficulty of debate on the Internet

The e-democracy conference room was intended to invite residents to discuss community issues and to engage in their solution with their own hands.

However, the number of cases in which debate have deepened to lead to actual problem solving is very small. It can be said that the debate on the Internet has been far more difficult than expected.

Almost all debates on the Internet proceeded by means of text and it is difficult to convey facial expression or verbal intonation to other people. It requires considerable skills to convey one's real intention only through text and not all people are equipped with this kind of skill.

Also, allowing people to participate at any time has the effect of making debate all the more difficult. There have been quite a few cases where debate matures and finally starts to move in the direction of conclusion when new participants come in to divert the debate in a different direction, resulting in unfocused discussion. Also, since anyone can participate, the information held by each participant is different. Due to difference in the volume of information held by each participant, debate on equal basis is difficult, preventing deep discussion from occurring.

There have been also participants, who repeatedly assert their arguments unilaterally and will not listen to others' opinions.

Among measures for solving these challenges is the organization of off-line meetings to provide participants with an occasion for seeing each other face to face. Meeting each other face to face in an off-line meeting and knowing other debaters' personality and character would make it easier to convey one's real intention even in a debate only through text and also off-the line meeting will make the information held by participants more uniform.

However, for this kind of off-line meeting to happen, debate has to reach a certain level of maturity. Also, it is difficult to hold them frequently and it is almost impossible to achieve a 100% attendance rate. Sometimes, even after the off-line meeting is held, new participants come in.

2) Low number of participants

The e-democracy conference room has had more than 1,500 participants for the past 3 years. This is an overwhelmingly large number in comparison with that of the electronic conference room set up by other local governments in Japan. However, given the population of Mie, 1,87 million, it is difficult to say that it obtains a wide range of participation of residents.

Furthermore, the number of 1,500 represents people who have participated in the e-democracy conference room at least once. It does not mean that 1,500 people are always participating in the room. Not a few people have ceased to participate once any theme of their interest is closed. Also, not all the people are participating frequently. We estimate the number of frequent and earnest participants at approx. 300, which is far less than we expected at the starting time.

It is presumed that there are various causes for this low number of participants.

First, as a feature of an electronic conference room, it is easy to participate newly at the starting time of any theme. However, with the passage of some time and with an accumulated number of postings, it is difficult for a new person to participate. As the number of postings grows, it is impossible to participate after reading them all and many people hesitate to participate without knowing the past development. Also, after a certain period has passed since the start, a kind of community has been already formulated by existing participants and new people find it difficult to join it. It is one of the features about an electronic conference room and something inevitable. Conversely, an electronic conference room is an effective tool for formulating a community. To facilitate midstream participation in the debate, the e-editor is requested to provide easy-to-understand information on the past development or some ingenuity. But, on the other hand, cooperation from key participants should be also asked.

Another possible reason for few participants is that many people feel awkward about giving their own opinions in a completely open forum where the contents of their postings are made public on the Internet. In this respect, it is difficult to find effective solution. However, it can be said that it is important for existing participants and e-editors to create an easy-to-participate atmosphere in the procedure of debate.

It can be also presumed that lack of attractive themes for all residents is preventing the number of participants from growing. Although 39 themes have been set so far, covering a variety of areas and responding to various residents' needs, it cannot be said that they have been sufficient enough to meet all the residents' needs. Residents are allowed to propose themes freely. Therefore, if the theme one desires to debate is not available, it can be proposed and that theme can be operated by that person serving as an e-editor. However, to become an e-editor, start and operate the theme is

burdensome and it is natural for participants to hesitate. It is necessary to provide a setup where participants can propose themes casually and find as many participants as possible, who are willing to propose themes actively.

3) Challenge due to the setup being conducted by the administration

It has been already explained that the e-democracy conference room has been set up by the administration and operated by participants' initiative. However, there have been challenges caused by the administration setting up the conference room.

In particular, what has been causing trouble is that critical remarks against the administration have been simply repeated. The e-democracy conference room is designed to set up a theme and invite participants to debate along the theme. However, people dissatisfied with the administration on a daily basis, found a perfect venue in the administrative site for posting their discontents. There have been participants, if not many, who repeat their unilateral administrative criticism, completely irrelevant to the theme. These participants sometimes post a large volume of criticism with similar contents, resulting in the interruption of debate. Also, irrelevant postings can be a major cause for disrupting a smooth debate development along the theme, which in turn, make new possible participants hesitant to participate.

The e-democracy conference room adopts a preliminary check system in which if information violating privacy and information containing slander or discrimination are posted, their publication is suspended.

However, it does not seem proper to keep unpublicized any criticism against the administration, even if it seems mere slander. Also, as for postings irrelevant to the theme, it is difficult to judge its relevancy objectively and strict and objective and rational judgment criteria will be required so that the subjective view of the e-editor, who decides non-publication. Also, for postings which are not publicized, it should be necessary to provide other occasions for having one's say.

Setting up an effective system for facilitating debate in a meaningful way becomes all the more difficult when it is operated by the administration which advocates for fairness.

5. Desirable Future Operation

Based upon the success cases and the challenges described above, we think that future operation should be as follows:

The desirable future operation is summarized separately for each objective of the e-democracy conference room: “enhancement of residents’ capability of self-government” and “residents’ involvement in the administration.”

(1) Enhancement of residents’ capability of self-government (toward setup and operation by residents’ initiative)

It has been already discussed that, although the e-democracy conference room was set up by the administration, it is desirable that it should be set up and operated by residents’ own initiative. At present, three years have passed since the start of the e-democracy conference room, the number of forums for opinion exchanges on the Internet have been growing steadily and some of them can be visited as safely and securely as the ones set up by the administration. Also, when people who have been engaged in the operation of the e-democracy conference room as participants, are to be engaged in the operation of such a forum, they can utilize their know-how acquired from the operation of the e-democracy conference room. Then, it should be possible to secure a sufficiently safe forum even if it is operated by residents’ initiative.

Also, when the e-democracy conference room started, electronic conference rooms such as the e-democracy conference room were prevalent ones for exchanges on the Internet. However, at present, various other services are being provided such as blog or SNS.

SNS (social networking service) is a community-type website opened with a view to allowing participants to introduce their friends to each other and expand their relationships with friends. Its feature is that links among participants are made visible. This provides a system which shows how many links a certain participant has with other participants and whom this participant is friends with. While anonymity is maintained, the confidence that participant enjoys can be measured. It can be said that the operation of a site safer than electronic conference rooms is possible.

In Mie prefecture as well, there is a move toward building this SNS on the private sector initiative. If this is realized, it can be expected that, with the cooperation from people engaged in the operation of the e-democracy conference room and e-editors, the site for opinion exchanges among residents will be set up and operated smoothly by private

initiative.

While residents prepare and operate a site for tackling issues of high public interest such as community challenges and work spontaneously, the administration provides easy-to-understand information such as a website and creates an environment where anyone can view administrative information freely. This is an approach suitable for the basic philosophy of the Mie prefectural comprehensive plan in which both stakeholders are to interact with each other to aim for a certain objective/achievement. In this manner, the safe and secure site can be acquired and the provision of information by the administration is solved, enabling the setup and operation by residents' initiative. The administration is intended to perform the role required of it for the development of the site for discussion among residents in cooperation with the private initiative by providing the operation know-how acquired through the operation of the e-democracy conference room conference room.

(2) Promotion of residents' involvement in the administration (Further enhancement of public hearing function)

The e-democracy conference room conference room is a forum where residents discuss community issues. The themes can be roughly divided into two: ones in which community issues proposed by residents are discussed and the others in which the administration set an administrative issue as a theme and results of the discussion by residents are intended to reflect on the administration.

As for the latter, it is designed for reflection on the administration. Therefore, by taking into consideration experienced challenges and constraints in terms of the operation of the electronic conference room, the Mie prefectural government plans to transfer to two systems: e-comment and e-monitor as operational methods which are more achievement-oriented and more effective and make the reflection on policies and projects easier.

Simply put, e-comment is a system for inviting various proposals from residents about administrative themes. As described above, it is difficult to build consensus through debate among participants. Sometimes, severe confrontation occurs, making it very difficult to exchange opinions in a constructive manner. Therefore, in principle, it has been decided that, without requiring debate, an administrative theme the administration

desires to solve is presented to residents in public and opinions along the theme are called for. Since presented opinions are made public on the Internet, anybody can review such opinions. Residents can think about better ideas and proposals while referring to such opinions.

Residents who have viewed others' opinions are asked not to criticize them even if they are opposed to them, rather to present their opinions as counterproposals. We make this rule known to everyone as a basic rule and seek understanding. Also, periodically, the administration makes intermediate responses so that a certain level of response from the administration can be secured. Thus, through communication between residents themselves, the administration and various stakeholders can get involved in prefectural policy planning and project management review and mutual interaction can create better results. Then, we can utilize the lessons learned from the e-democracy conference room conference room for the next-generation public hearing tool.

This system is designed to set a variety of themes for policies in a phase of decision making or for projects to be implemented and to invite proposals or ideas from residents in an open forum. Although various systems for posting opinions for the administration have been available up to now (in that posted opinions are made public in a speedy manner and responses by the administration are also made public), this can be said to be an approach with few precedents. It is expected that the secure establishment of this system will increase the transparency of the administration and that the relationship of trust between residents and the administration will be deepened.

The second approach is the e-monitor. This is an electronic questionnaire for pre-registered resident monitors. Based upon the reality that many residents feel uneasiness about asserting their opinions in an open forum, the e-monitor system is designed to utilize the Internet to send out questionnaires in order to actively collect opinions of such residents.

Although questionnaires have been conventionally utilized to grasp opinions of residents, the substantial time and cost required for their preparation, distribution and tallying of results of questionnaires have been problems. However, by using IT, almost all of these problems can be solved and easy implementation can be made possible. Also, it is expected that the participation in e-monitor can lead to posting opinions for

e-comments or others.

(3) Conclusion

The review of the project described above has been made by looking back on the operation up to now and giving consideration to the changing environment such as the advance of IT. However, we do not think that this review has solved every problem. There is no such a word as “completion” for a forum in which residents discuss community issues or get involved in administration. Because people, materials and information are changing all the time. As long as IT is utilized, tools by which residents’ opinions are reflected on the administration and tools by which mutual understanding with residents are deepened to build the relationship of trust, require periodic review and proper review of operational policy, based upon the operational status, the advance of technology, the development of privately-led sites. In particular, as for IT, progress is remarkable in that new service such as blog and SNS, which were not common at the time of start of e-democracy conference room conference room have appeared one after another during the past three years. Also, privately-led forums can now set up with ease and at a lower cost, bringing about moves which were unthinkable three years ago.

Furthermore, questionnaires, if distributed electronically, can be done with less cost and less time. IT is now changing the styles and costs of not only bulletin board systems but also all other tools in a major way. An effective system may be realized through a combination of these tools and sometimes through a combination of not electronic tools but conventional methods.

As mentioned above, the enhancement of residents’ self-government capability and the residents’ involvement in the administration cannot be covered by any single tool. Regardless of whether IT is utilized or not, the prefectural administration provides residents with a variety of occasions where they can participate in community building on their own initiative. Also, there are a range of research tools for understanding the needs and awareness of residents. We intend to understand the characteristics of these various tools, clarify what kind of and how much of achievements should be sought, develop and adopt optimum tools for that or combine those tools effectively so as to aim at higher level of residents’ capability of self government and active participations in administration. We are determined to study all possibilities in the future continuously for that

objective.

In Closing

We can be equal on the Net, and e-government has a potential to bring us 'equal and fair society' if the system is designed for universal use. Therefore, we will continue to explore the possibilities of e-government and ensure accessibility for everyone. However, we must consider those who do not have access at the same time. As some people are not willing to use computers, it would be dangerous for the government to shift completely to the technology-based system. The system which is independent on technology needs to be maintained as well.

In terms of promoting discussion among residents by means of IT, we have decided to give up our seat to the private sector. Although our contribution may have been small in this respect, in that a new phase can be explored only through challenging new possibilities, we believe that our efforts have not been wasted.

When we view e-democracy from the viewpoint of the public hearing system for local government, its deficiencies have become clarified in our experience. Although we have been running after two objectives, we are now facing a new challenge, the utilization of IT for the purpose of public hearing, which is our primary role. We look forward to sharing our experience in IT public hearing in a few years' time.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Mr. Hideo Tsuji and Mr. Toshiya Horiki.

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