

2. Visiting *Organization for the Promotion of Okitama Self-Sufficiency Zone* and *Shirataka Nora Society* in Okitama Region, Yamagata Prefecture

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Okitama region lies in the southern part of Yamagata Prefecture. Regarding the three cities and five towns in this region with an idea of one self-sufficiency zone, Organization for the Promotion of Okitama Self-Sufficiency Zone was founded in August 2014 to generate industry and employment based on rich local resources within the region, with the goal of creating a positive local economic cycle. We visited the Okitama region in February 2015, still covered in deep snow, to hear from Mr. Tsutomu Watanabe, who is the Co-representative Director of the organization. We also visited Shirataka Nora Society, an organization which shares the same mission in the same region, and heard from them over a meal deliciously prepared by hand.

The region was formerly called Yonezawa Domain in the feudal age. In the legacy of the domain's "spirit of self-sufficiency" and "development of local industry," a ground-breaking attempt has just begun to share and connect these long-standing locally-focused regional revitalization programs in the larger region.

Organization for the Promotion of Okitama Self-Sufficiency Zone

Surrounded by mountains in all directions in the upper reaches of the Mogami River, the Okitama Basin is blessed with rich water and farmland, with thriving rice-farming and fruit-growing industry. Beautiful pastoral scenery, which may well be called Japan's original unspoiled landscape, can be found throughout the four seasons. In fact, Iide, a town within this region, has won the highest prize for the First Annual Most Beautiful Villages in Japan Scenery Contest (hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries) for its scattered-settlement farm village scenery.



At the office of the organization

Three cities and five towns are included in the self-sufficiency zone, including Yonezawa City, Nagai City, Nanyo City, Takahata Town, Kawanishi Town, Oguni Town, Shirataka Town, and Iide Town. With 2,498 square kilometers of land, which is

a little less than five times the land mass of the 23-ward area of Tokyo, the zone is slightly over one-fourth of the entire Yamagata Prefecture. The aforementioned Yonezawa Domain covers the same territory, and the tradition of the autonomous and self-reliant spirit has remained in the region since the times of the feudal lord Yozan Uesugi. The current population is 220,000.

Carrying On the "Circulation Model" Concept

Various regional revitalization programs have been tried in the Okitama Region, including Nagai City's Rainbow Plan which took food waste collected from the separated garbage and turned it into compost. Mr. Yoshihide Kanno, who came up with this plan, initially saw chickens he was raising eat soil and muddy water, and wondered if the animals need the microorganisms in local soil. This led him to the circulation model that he called the Rainbow Plan, which turns food waste into compost, compost into rich soil, rich soil into safe and secure crops, crops into meals, and the meals back into food waste. Today, all 5000 households in the central city district of Nagai participate in the program, and the program is a source of pride for the city as many from within and outside Japan come for an observation visit.

The image of the circulation model, which was central to the Rainbow Plan, was carried on in the conceptual framework of the Organization for the Promotion of Okitama Self-Sufficiency Zone. In response to the expanding liberalization of importing agricultural produce as a result of globalization, Mr. Kanno emphasized the need "to create the connections that originally existed among agriculture, food, and the environment, and among people." Ultimately, his suggestion to "form self-sufficiency zones like a mosaic across the nation" served as an impetus for the creation of the Organization for the Promotion of Okitama Self-Sufficiency Zone.

Other municipalities in the Okitama Basin are also notable, including Takahata Town, which is known nationwide as "the origin of organic farming," and Iide Town, which has been aiming to become the "Town with an Energy Circulation Model" and working on locally producing and locally consuming renewable energy. Mr. Kanji Hoshi is a farmer poet, a leader in Takahata's organic farming movement for many years, and a proposer of the self-sufficiency zone concept, and he explains this way: "Behind the concept of the self-sufficiency zone is this Chinese Buddhist teaching called '*shin-do-fu-ji*' (body-earth-not-two). It means that human beings and the soil cannot be separated."

Towards a Regional Circulatory Society

The Organization has set the following four activities as pillars of a "regional circulatory society": 1) promoting regional self-sufficiency and intra-regional distribution; 2) building safe and secure agriculture and food production in coexistence with nature; 3) putting theory into practice in educational settings; and 4) becoming a global model for reducing medical expenses. They have established eight subsections to promote these activities, solicited volunteers for each project, and conducted field studies and research activities while moving forward the discussions on these issues. For example, the Renewable Energy Subsection has begun considering the possibilities of small hydroelectric power and hot spring energy, and the Intra-Regional Distribution (Local Production Local Consumption) Subsection has been coordinating with Yamagata University and others for discussions on rice bran oil and snow storehouses (which is a mechanism for drawing out sweetness from vegetables and fruits by storing them in the snow).

The Organization has around 250 members including group (non-individual) members. Corporations, municipal governments, universities, unions, and NPOs that are working on local-production-local-consumption, organic farming, and other circulatory regional development measures from all around the Okitama Region have come together; individuals who support the idea of the self-sufficiency zone have also joined. This grand effort toward a self-sufficiency zone is unprecedented in Japan, and has been moving forward thanks to coordination across industries. Mr. Watanabe says that when it comes to regional activities, the

expectation is to show results rather than to debate the logic behind them. According to him, members with a sense of pride and mission have been enjoying their involvement in subsectional activities now as they plan to officially start next fiscal year. When resident discussions develop into various projects, and when they organically connect with each other, there is hope that this movement will spread and regions will become sustainable, as more and more regions ought to be.

Shirataka Nora Society

Shirataka Town is located in the middle of the mountains at the foot of the Okitama Basin, surrounded by the Shirataka Hills to its east and the Asahi Mountain Range to its west. Along the Mogami River, which runs through just about the center of the town, lies rich and vast farmlands. Rice is the main crop grown in the town, but sericulture and dairy farming also take place, in addition to growing leaf tobacco and apples.

For Diverse Members to Sustain Their Lives on Organic Farming

Shirataka Nora Society is an agricultural processing group founded by eleven people of various ages and backgrounds in Shirataka Town. Different circumstances brought each of them to organic farming, but they founded the group together as they each desired an entity from which they could support their livelihoods on farming. Using pesticide-free and reduced-pesticide crops as ingredients, and without any additives or chemical seasoning, they produce and sell pickles and rice cakes, which are both local specialty foods, as well as their original side dishes, confectionery, and other processed food items. We visited Meguriya, a restaurant from which Shirataka Nora Society processes and sells their products.

From Its Inception to Today

Mr. Fumio Ouchi was the representative of Shirataka Nora Society when it was founded. He had found out about Shirataka Town at the National Chamber of Agriculture's Consultation Center for New Entry into Agriculture, fell in love with the dignified presence of the Asahi Mountain Range that overlooks the town, and decided to move and settle there. According to Mr. Ouchi, Shirataka Nora Society was founded in 2006 by reorganizing the Nora Society, which had originally been started by Ms. Mitsuko Hikita as a women's group. The reorganization required a huge transition in the Society's activities, from mainly growing and selling organic vegetables to processing the produce for sale. This model of growers being engaged in processing and sales was created as a means to sustain their livelihoods on agriculture. The model can be considered a forerunner to the so-called sixth-order industrialization¹ approach, which has been actively promoted as a revitalization strategy for rural farming and fishing towns today.



Meguriya, Shirataka Nora ciety's

¹ Sixth-order industry denotes an integrated approach that combines the primary industry (agriculture, forestry, and fisheries), secondary industry (processing and manufacturing), and tertiary industry (distribution and sales), drawing from this equation: $1 \times 2 \times 3 = 6$.

Starting from 32 items in the beginning, Shirataka Nora Society now makes more than 60 processed food items, the purchase-order membership has reached around 300 members, and annual sales has reached around 20 million yen. They have begun partnering with the Consumers' Co-operative Union in 2007, adopted planned production, and continue to conduct almost all the processing by themselves.

Unique yet Traditional Organizational Management

In November 2011, the Society incorporated as an enterprise cooperative as a result of the Society's policy to maintain equality among the members. The Society aimed to avoid placing a heavy burden on an individual serving as a representative, and to respect each member's opinions. Membership consists of a good balance of locals and transplants, men and women, and people of various ages, and they set up a system where the representative changes every two years. They have a unique way of running the organization where tasks are divided equally to each individual, not defined by household unit, while a sense of the traditional farming community could also be seen in how they discuss matters thoroughly and work cooperatively.

Processing Agricultural Products as an "Extension of the Home Kitchen"

Members say that Shirataka Nora Society's processing work is an "extension of the home kitchen" where female members share their everyday complaints with each other as they work with their hands. "It's minimum wage but I'm happy," Ms. Mie Kato, a member who has supported Shirataka Town's organic farming for a long time, says of this work format, and her words propel us to think deeply about economic wealth and degree of happiness in rural life. This "extension of the home kitchen" work is all by hand, does not seek efficiency, and avoids mechanization. Thanks to the hard work put in to producing and selling multiple items including local traditional preserved foods, they are contributing to transmission of the local culture through passing down the everyday dishes for farming families.

However, these processed agricultural items made from pesticide-free and reduced-pesticide ingredients do not sell well at the local farmers' market, and the overwhelming majority of the patrons are city dwellers who appreciate the value of safe and secure agricultural products. It is difficult to make "local production, local consumption" a reality and to expand agricultural processing in the region as a means to transmit local culture. These issues have much to do with how Japanese people consider agriculture and with how agriculture ought to be in Japan, and pose a big challenge for the future of Shirataka Nora Society.

Recently, Shirataka Nora Society is making a steady effort to raise awareness, deepen understanding, and foster cooperation within the regional community through various activities, including cooking classes using produce they made and lectures on safe and secure food. They hope to be more engaged with the town government to explore possibilities to provide their produce for the school lunch program and for hospital meals. However, when it comes to having more members, the condition to become a member is a 300,000-yen investment, and the Society is not thinking about actively expanding membership for now. Maintaining the current organizational structure, their goals seem to be to take themselves beyond agricultural processing and to explore various activities rooted in the community.

Expanding Regional Activities

The region suffered damages from a landslide caused by heavy rain last summer, and there was a renewed awareness of the need to manage the degraded forest for the sake of disaster prevention. Shirataka Nora Society member Mr. Shoichi Sugawara is involved in another group called Shirataka Forest Improvement Society where they follow the rural tradition of utilizing the bounty of the mountain as a precious resource. Their activities contribute to the reevaluation of the forests, as they work to determine the boundaries of, thin trees in, and manage planted forests that have been abandoned. Additionally, they hold membership in the Shirataka Regional Revitalization Network, and have been contributing to the needs of the regional community, such as playing an active role in giving recommendations on the rebuilding of the town hall building. They are also a full member of the aforementioned Organization for the Promotion of Okitama Self-Sufficiency Zone, and are expected to take their work beyond the town into the larger region in areas such as renewable energy use in the future.



Snowy landscape at Okitama region in Yamagata