

## **E-Democracy in Japan**

NTT DATA

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### **1. Progress of local autonomy and citizens' will to participate**

In Japan, local governments can be described as being 30% autonomous. Some 70% of local (more correctly, prefectural) government work is mandated by the central government. Local governments perform the work just as the central government orders, with no local assembly discussion permitted; in fact, they resemble local executive organs of the central government. While the central government has many sources of revenue and distributes money to the local ones, the prefectures have few of their own sources of revenue.

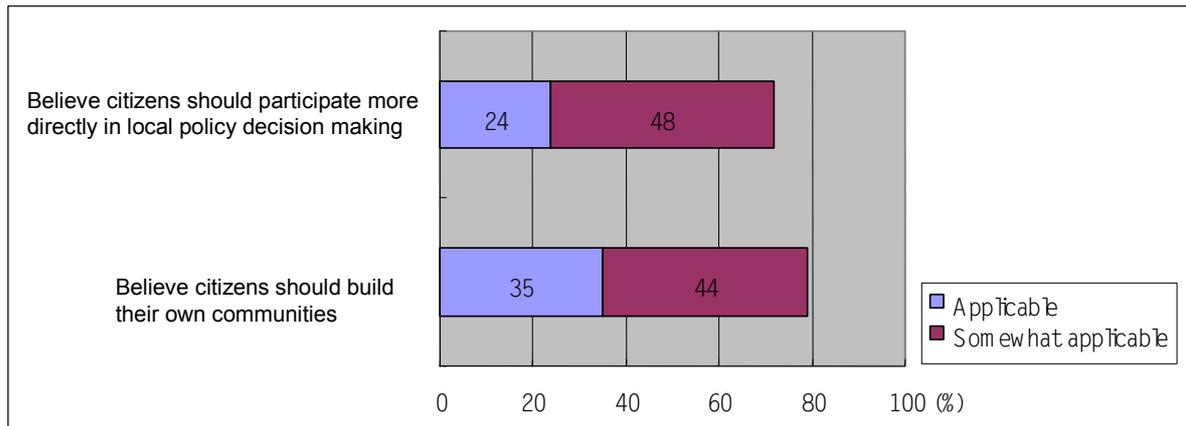
The purpose of local policy has been the attainment of the national minimum and the uniform development of national land. The centralized administration system has been appropriate for pursuing these goals. The central government has defined what the national minimum is and has dictated what the local governments must do. The local governments have benefited from this system. With subsidies from the central government, they have undertaken public works and have been able to stimulate their economies.

However, subsidies alone are insufficient to finance public enterprises, so the local governments share the costs and take out loans. During the high economic growth era, the local governments could count on future tax revenues to pay their debts. However, the economy has matured and increased revenues cannot be expected. Both central and local governments are in financial difficulties. Local communities realize that they cannot depend on the policy of the central government. The share of the cost of public works is a heavy burden for local governments, so public works are no longer welcomed. Further, public works sometimes destroy the natural environment. This is also a reason the development policy of the state has reached a turning point. How local areas should be developed or managed is not the problem of the central government anymore, but of the local ones and the local citizens.

From such a background the Package Law on Decentralization of Power was enacted in 1999 and enforced in 2000. This law clarified the relationship between the central government and local ones; the central, prefectural and municipal governments are on an equal footing. It is said that local autonomy consists of corporate self-governance (*koerperliche Selbstverwaltung*) and citizen autonomy; this law enabled corporate self-governance. Now local governments must make their own policy of area management, based on discussions with the local citizens rather than looking to the central government. The policies of the local governments should be based on the will and needs of residents.

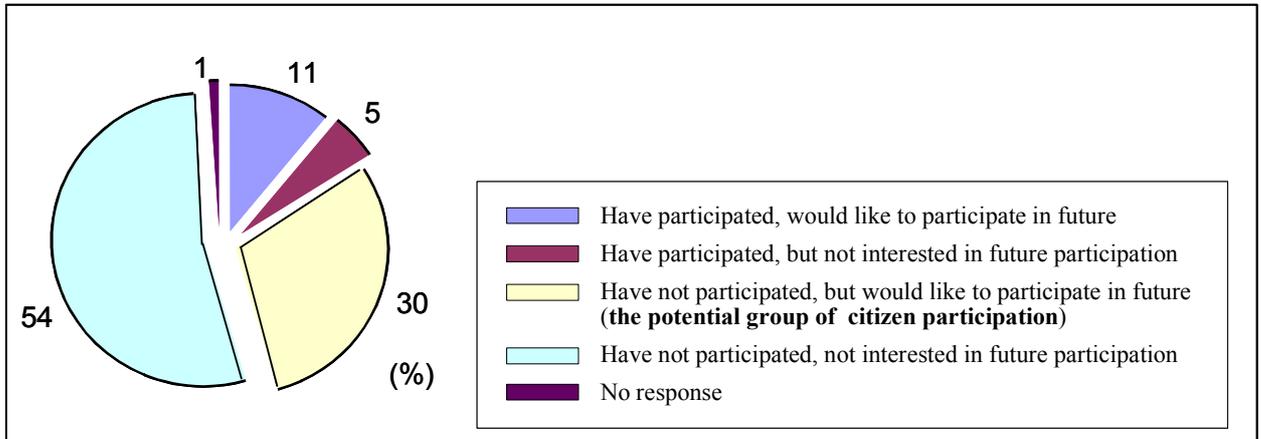
At the same time, citizens are showing increasing interest in taking part in local administration. NTT DATA conducted a nationwide questionnaire survey of men and women from 18 to 75 years old in 2001. In this survey 72% replied that citizens should participate more directly in determining local policies, and 79% replied that citizens should build the local community where they live by themselves (Fig.1).

**Fig.1 Opinions and attitudes about local community (N=2036)**

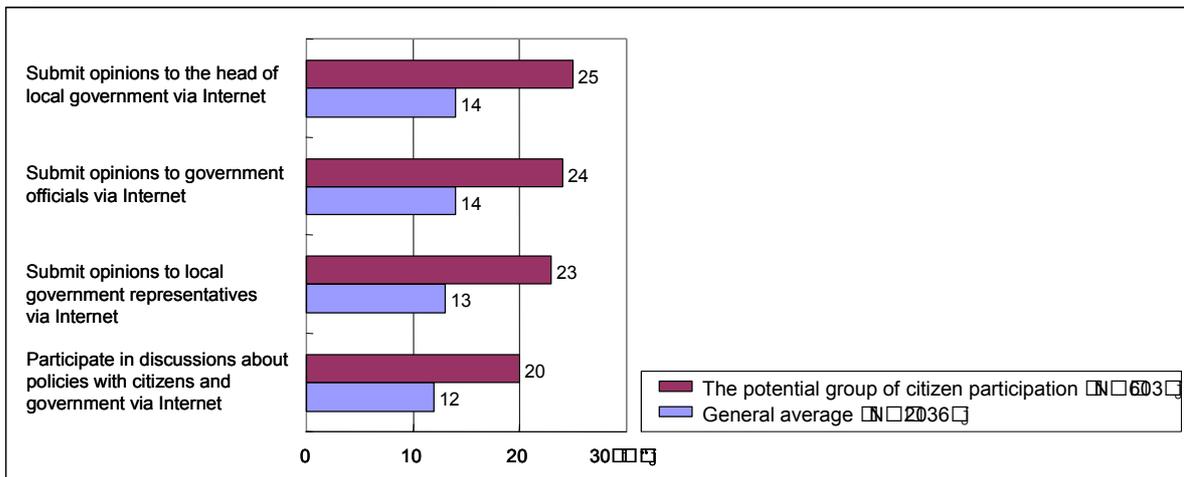


We asked also about the participation in local policy making or management of local promotional events. 11% of all respondents have participated in making local policy or managing local promotional events and would like to participate in the future as well. Another 30% did not have experience but would like to participate (Fig.2). We call them the potential group of civic participation. In the process of making a master plan of city or environment planning, local governments that are positive about civic participation not only hold public hearings but also organize working committees involving volunteer citizens and workshops. Nevertheless, sometimes such local governments find that only the same faces appear at all occasions and that these people get tired of participating in events of the local government. Consequently, the local governments hope that many more people become interested in civic participation. If civic participation is to take root, the potential group of civic participation, which contains 30% of the Japanese population, will have to be enticed to participate. ICT can be an effective tool to help the group participate. According to the same survey, 20 –25 % of the potential group of civic participation indicated intentions to participate in communication with government via the Internet, and this rate was approximately twice the general average (Fig.3). This finding indicates that a new channel using ICT will pave the way for the potential group to participate in civic activities.

**Fig.2 Experience participating in local policy making or management of local promotional events (N=2036)**



**Fig.3 Intention to communicate with government via Internet (%)**



## 2. E-government and e-democracy

It was 1997 when the word “e-government” was used for the first time in an official document; the main target of the e-Japan Strategy, which was approved in a Cabinet meeting in 2001, is to build an e-government by 2003. The e-Japan Strategy is a national strategy for making Japan the most advanced IT state in the world. The main goals of e-government are to improve the quality of public services and the efficiency of administrative work. Many ministries upload information to their web sites and ask for public comments on drafts of regulations. In particular, the transparency of policymaking processes is being improved by providing minutes of advisory councils on the web sites. However, the e-Japan Strategy, which mainly guides policies of the central government, did not take e-democracy into consideration. (The e-Japan Strategy II, 2003, includes civic participation in the goals of e-government.)

There is still no established definition of e-democracy. Some people think it is made up of

NPO/NGOs and citizens nationwide or worldwide who are well organized as pressure groups and who exercise a strong influence over politics using the Internet. In the USA e-democracy seems to be associated mainly with election campaigns using the Internet and communication between statesmen and the electorate via the Internet. In the UK the Blair Administration held discussions on e-democracy in 2002. The paper "In the service of democracy" presents a discussion of e-participation and e-voting. E-participation refers to online consultation and deliberation. Today the UK seems to place greater importance on online consultation compared with online deliberation as far as we can see from UK Online. We would like to define e-democracy as civic participation in policy making and implementation processes using ICT. We include elections of representatives in policy making although this may not be the usual usage.

In Japan, the Internet is not used as a tool for election campaigns because it is against the election law. Even statesmen who have their own web sites and send out information regularly may not change the contents in the period of the election campaign. Few local assemblymen are interested in ICT, so the Internet does not play a role in local politics. Some local governments are introducing e-voting, but this is not widespread because of the prohibitive costs. Moreover, local statesmen do not like e-voting. They prefer signed ballots and are clinging to the conventional system. Hence, for the present, Japanese e-democracy means mainly civic participation in local area administration and the direct communication between citizens and local governments using ICT. Some local governments have also been trying to make e-local government a tool of e-democracy.

### **3. E-forum of the local governments in Japan**

The e-forum is seen as an effective tool for e-democracy. In December 2002, 733 local governments provided e-forums on their web sites. (There are about 3200 local (prefectural and municipal) governments in Japan.) Best known of these are the e-forums provided by Fujisawa City, Yamato City, and Mie Prefecture.

#### **(1) Fujisawa City (Population: ca. 390,000)**

The civic e-forum of Fujisawa City began on a trial basis in February 1997 and started regular operation in April 2001. The first e-forum in Japan, it served as a means for the local government to discuss the overall city administration, and became a model for other local governments. This e-forum consists of a civic area and a city office area. The aim of the former is to make online communities; anyone living, studying or working in the city can open a new session about any topic of the area. The aim of the later is to discuss city administration; the steering committee opens or closes sessions pertaining to the area.

The steering committee, consisting of volunteer citizens, is entrusted with the administration of the

whole e-forum. In the civic area the person who opens a session serves as the facilitator of the session; in the city hall area a member of the steering committee is the facilitator. There are also managers skilled in managing online communities; they check that messages posted on the e-forum abide by the rules. (All messages on the e-forum are open. When managers find messages that break the e-forum rules, they notify the steering committee and take necessary measures.) They also assist the facilitators, and perform other related duties.

Slander and insults (flaming) are a serious threat in e-forums, but so far the e-forums of Fujisawa City have not been attacked. Although careless users sometimes post messages containing private information, this has not caused serious problems. This success is probably thanks to the coordination of the steering committee, facilitators, managers and public officials. Another common problem of e-forums is the small number of users. However, the e-forums of Fujisawa City had 9,931 accesses and 1,084 messages in the civic area, and 2,939 accesses and 592 messages in the city hall area in May 2003. The city's success in making and activating online communities is highly regarded. Yet, in terms of the other aim of making proposals based on discussions in the e-forum, the main people involved with the e-forums do not seem to be satisfied with the results. Although the steering committee has made some proposals to the city, there seems to be a problem about getting the city hall area as active as the civic area.

## **(2) Yamato City (Population: ca. 220,000)**

The e-forums of Yamato City are also highly regarded for its good operation and popularity. A feature of this city's e-forums is the participation of all government employees, so that the e-forums function as effective interfaces between citizens and the government. The web site of a local government is usually its interface with citizens, but the pages of each division can provide only general information to citizens. To overcome this limitation, Yamato City has enabled direct communication between citizens and public officials in the e-forums. A bureaucracy is required for managing the public administration effectively, and each member of the staff belongs to the bureaucratic organization. Public officials can be responsible for specific matters only. On the other hand, needs and opinions of citizens are varied and complex. They do not match the functionally divided organization of local governments. Yamato City is trying to overcome this weak point by using e-forums combined with mailing lists. All messages from citizens to the e-forums are automatically sent to all members of the staff. Public officials reply to messages that they believe are relevant to their jobs. Staff members remind each other so that messages from citizens are not left unanswered. Civic users can experience the fact that their messages are taken seriously by the local government and are satisfied with precise answers to their questions. These questions and answers are open in the e-forum, so the information is shared among citizens at large. Thus, the e-forums are working well from the viewpoint of communication between

citizens and government.

Some people criticize the local government for assigning so much work to the e-forums. But we should learn from experience in Yamato City; it is possible that citizens and government can communicate directly with each other in a city of this scale, and that the government tackles the diverse tasks brought up in the e-forums.

### **(3) Mie Prefecture (Population: ca. 1,860,000)**

In Mie Prefecture the former Governor Kitagawa took the lead in reforming the prefectural administration under the slogan “Prefectural administration starting from residents.” In May 2002 Mie Prefecture started its e-forums as places for citizens to manage their prefecture by themselves. This rounded off a series of administrative reforms in Mie Prefecture, which spanned the entire prefectural government including civic participation, an overhaul of the bureaucratic mindset and the government organization.

According to a member of the staff in charge of the e-forums, their foremost contribution has been to start direct communication between citizens and government staff. Hitherto, the staff had few opportunities of talking with citizens, but in the e-forums more and more members of the staff are communicating with citizens personally. This experience has helped the staff see the citizens as living residents, not as statistics, and to think of the “prefectural administration starting from residents.” In this way, the e-forums have played a role in reforming the staff’s mindset, too.

## **4. Problems and difficulties of e-forums**

### **(1) Flaming**

The most serious threat for an e-forum is flaming (slander and insults). Some local governments have had to close their e-forums because floods of slander were posted and people lost interest in the e-forums. In addition, the local governments feared they would be sued over flaming in their e-forums. One municipal government enacted a penal code in a local ordinance against harmful information on e-forums. Some local governments check messages for slander, insults and unacceptable private information before they are posted on the e-forums. In the US, such inspection would be viewed as an infringement of free speech. “This has had effect of forcing governments to avoid the establishment of public forums, leaving them to private and non-profit organizations that can censor users without the same legal restraints on violating a citizen’s free speech.” (Dutton, William H.: *”Society on the Line”*, Oxford University Press, 1991) In Japan such inspection is not objected to so much, because people understand that e-forums can be plagued with trouble over flaming. People seem to expect that e-forums provided by local governments are controlled and safe. The inspections are minimal, and messages that follow basic rules can still disrupt discussions. It is heavy burden for facilitators and local governments to handle such

messages. Many are of the opinion that the establishment of e-forums is not worth the risks and burdens entailed. Despite the possible drawbacks, the e-forum is still a flexible tool for involving many citizens in public administration compared with face-to-face workshops or committees. What is needed is a method of managing e-forums with minimal burden.

## **(2) Staff participation**

One of the institutional problems is staff participation. In order to motivate citizens to take part in e-forums, it is important that staff members join in discussions of a range of e-forums, not just the ones for which they are directly responsible; this level of participation will help give residents the impression that e-forum discussions are taken seriously by the local government. However, for public officials it is difficult to judge what they may say in e-forums. If they always need many authorizations from their superiors, it will take too much time to reply. Traditional public relations proceedings of many local governments are inappropriate for communication over the Internet. It can also be unclear whether public officials may post on topics for which their division is not responsible, whether they should only give out information that has already been made public, whether they may air their personal opinions, and so forth. Such uncertainty discourages public officials from taking part in e-forums. Guidelines need to be drawn up.

## **5. Technical solutions**

Generally, facilitators guide the discussions in e-forums. The success of a forum depends on the skill and personality of the facilitator. This is quite a responsibility. Functions should be provided to aid facilitators in their roles. Another problem of e-forums is the difficulty of joining a discussion midway. New participants must wade through endless logs to find out what has been discussed so far. For participants and facilitators alike, functions should be made available for summarizing logs, showing overviews of discussions, selecting key issues by text mining all logs, and showing relations of issues. Recently some local governments are combining e-forum and GIS (Geographic Information System) or map functions. Maps help participants locate where the discussion is. If images can be posted on a forum, the sender does not have to describe the problem in text, and participants can see what the problem is. Discussions on e-forums tends to become abstract, but if participants discuss concrete problems of specific locations by using maps and pictures, they would be able to hold constructive discussions and come to conclusions.

## **6. Conclusion**

Japanese local governments are trying to create e-local government not only as a new channel for providing citizens with public services and tools for raising the efficiency of their work, but also as a platform on which to build and strengthen the partnership and coordination with citizens. They

are using e-forums for this purpose.

E-forums can aid in overhauling the mindset of public officials, fostering trust and satisfaction of citizens in local government, and establishing online communities that focus on the area; however, operating e-forums can be a heavy burden for local governments. The staff must reply to diverse messages from citizens and protect the forums from flaming. Indeed, e-forums could work against the aim of e-government, which is to increase efficiency. Nonetheless, e-forums open a wide channel for citizens to participate in local administration and provide a needed place where citizens can learn more about their localities through discussions. The operation and software specifications of e-forums are open to further discussion, but they already promise to become some of the most important tools for e-democracy.

In Japan, the involvement of citizens in local administration is indispensable for attaining the autonomy called for in the age of decentralization. Local governments need to boost the efficiency of their routine work and apply their resources to e-democracy.