Local Government in Japan

Council of Local Authorities for International Relations
Amid dynamic changes in society brought about by the rapid development of information technology and diversification of people’s values, there is renewed recognition of the role of local government as the administrative level closest to the people. Overseas as well, with the process of social change leading to diversification, it has become difficult to adequately address every issue with standardisation at the national level, and there is a widespread reevaluation of the powers held by various local authorities.

In Japan, the Omnibus Decentralisation Act came into force in April 2000 with the aims of clarifying the respective roles of national and local government, increasing the autonomy and independence of local authorities, and developing local communities that are full of vitality and rich in individuality. With these kinds of social changes taking place, I believe that sharing experience and expertise across national borders will contribute greatly to the future development of local government.

This book was created out of this awareness. It is designed to provide people involved in local administration overseas with a basic introduction to the current state of affairs of Japan’s system of local autonomy. The book was first published in 1995 and has been revised and is now in its sixth revised edition. We have taken care to make the book easy to understand even for readers with no detailed knowledge of Japan’s politics, administrative systems, or society.

Chapter One deals with special features of Japan’s local administrative system, Chapter Two with local administrative functions, and Chapter Three with challenges facing local governments. Chapter Four provides an explanation of the system responsible for the many functions of Japanese local authorities, and Chapter Five an explanation of the recent trend toward decentralisation.

It is my sincere hope that this book will contribute, even if only a little, to the understanding of Japan’s local autonomy system around the world.

March 31, 2005

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Chairman of the Board of Directors
Council of Local Authorities for International Relations

Note: This publication is based on information available as of November 2004.

It is intended to provide basic information about local government in Japan. Detailed or exceptional matters have therefore been omitted.
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Local government systems and practices vary significantly from country to country; for the most part, however, the main elements are similar.

The following general aspects of local government in Japan are described in this chapter:

1. The Legal Status of Local Government
2. The Basis of Local Government
3. The Tiers of Local Government
4. The Scale and Number of Local Governments
5. The Regional Character of Local Government
6. The Comprehensive Empowerment of Local Government
7. The Uniformity of Local Government
8. The Administrative Relationship of Central and Local Government
9. The Political Relationship of Central and Local Government
10. The Political Process of Local Government

1. The Legal Status of Local Government

Local government in Japan has its basis in the nation’s Constitution, adopted in 1946, which recognises local government as essential to democracy and establishes it as part of the nation’s system of governance.

Under the heading “Local Autonomy,” Chapter 8 of the Constitution contains the following four Articles. The content therein:

- Opens with a declaration of respect for local autonomy and its basic principles;
- Provides that members of the Legislative and Executive branches be elected by direct public elections;
- States clearly that local authorities should have a broad range of authority over a broad range of administrative functions, and grants local legislative authority;
- Imposes restrictions on the enactment of special legislation applicable only to a given local authority.

Accordingly, a number of laws were enacted concerning local government, but the core legislation for dealing with its organisation and management is the Local Autonomy Law.

The provisions of the Local Autonomy Law deal mainly with residents’ affairs, elected councils, and their executive bodies—all that which forms the core of local government. The Law also defines the status of local authorities, including their relationship with central government as well as with other local authorities, and has legal provisions for their financial affairs and other important administrative matters.

As such, local government is clearly defined in Japan’s Constitution and other national laws.

2. The Basis of Local Government
The Local Autonomy Law specifies that the basic units of local government shall be the prefectures and the municipalities. Local government in Japan is based on a system introduced by the national government as part of its drive to modernise the country at the end of the last century. At that time the system reflected stronger central governmental control than that of today; the former practise of centrally appointed governors is just one example of how strong the control was.

Much of that early system has been passed down to the present, though it has to be said that local government’s authority has increased substantially since the early post-war period, despite little structural change. Accordingly, Japan has had no experience of any group in a given geographical area taking the initiative to establish a self-governing body through a set of legal procedures, and no such mechanism exists to date.

The Local Autonomy Law was based on prefectures and municipalities as they existed prior to the Law’s enactment in 1947. The Law includes provisions for changing the geographical areas of local authorities, but does not have any provision that allows for the creation of a new authority where none exists, nor for abolishing an existing one so that the region under its jurisdiction will no longer belong to any authority.

3. The Tiers of Local Government

In any system of local government the number of tiers is usually directly related to such factors as geographical conditions, population levels, the nature of local administration and the corresponding level of centralisation.

In Japan, local government is two-tiered: prefectures serving wider areas, and municipalities providing local services.

Regarding the number of tiers of administrative units in other countries, federal states typically have a four-tier system consisting of the federation, quasiautonomous states, local government units serving wide areas, and units providing local services. On the other hand, unitary states are generally three-tiered with central government, wide-area local government units and basic local government units. By this measure, Japan is a typical unitary state.

4. The Scale and Number of Local Governments

Prefectures and municipalities vary widely in terms of population and area.

Japan’s 47 prefectures range in population from Tokyo Metropolis (Tokyo-to) with more than 12 million, to Tottori Prefecture (Tottori-ken) with just 610,000; and in size, from the Hokkai-do Region (Hokkai-do) with an area exceeding 80,000 sq km, to Kagawa Prefecture (Kagawa-ken) with a little under 2,000 sq km.

The municipalities exhibit even greater variety. They range from Yokohama city (Yokohama-shi), with a population of about 3.5 million, to Aogashima Village (Aogashima-mura) in Tokyo, with a population of about 200. As for area, Ashoro Town (Ashoro-cho) in Hokkaido covers about 1,400 sq km, compared to Takashima Town (Takashima-cho) in Nagasaki Prefecture, at about 1.34 sq km.

The number of prefectures has remained unchanged since the system was adopted during the Meiji Period (1868-1912). Prefectural areas are based on the local administrative units instituted under ancient statutes during the 8th century, as well as the relationships that existed between the Shogunate government and each area’s local clan during the Edo Period, which began in 1603. As a result, the areas are well established in the minds of the Japanese people.
However, there are those today who hold the view that the sizes of the prefectures should be reviewed to match changes in the economic reality brought about by Japan’s post-World War II economic growth.

The number of municipalities has steadily decreased since the end of World War II, mainly to improve their local economy by widening their fiscal base. Many towns and villages merged between 1953 and 1961 following the central government’s introduction of legislation promoting municipal mergers in accordance with the Law of Promotion of Merger of Towns and Villages, and the number of municipalities fell to one-third of the previous high of some 10,000. This led to improvements in their administrative and financial capabilities, and helped to promote the growth of local autonomy and the urbanisation that followed, as Japan entered its boom years. From then on, mergers took place according to the realities and requirements of municipalities, and also following the enactment of the Law Concerning Special Measures for the Merger of Municipalities in 1965. There are presently 3,100 municipalities (as of April 1, 2004).

**Local Authority Population and Area**

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<th>Population</th>
<th>Cities</th>
<th>Special Wards</th>
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April 2004
### Area

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<td>695</td>
<td>23</td>
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April 2004

Over time the scale of municipalities has grown in tandem with the increasing complexity of daily life, and as basic units of local government, they have always remained close to the people. As with prefectures, the network of daily life has extended beyond municipal boundaries, and to deal with this problem, municipalities have formed larger administrative areas and conducted joint management of common issues.
Prefectures, Prefectural Capitals, and Number of Municipalities by Prefecture

- Prefectural capital
- Designated city
- Designated city and prefectural capital
- Core city
- Core city and prefectural capital

Hokkaido Area
1. Hokkaido Sapporo 212

Tohoku Area
2. Aomori Aomori 67
3. Iwate Morioka 56
4. Miyagi Sendai 69
5. Akita Akita 69
6. Yamagata Yamagata 44
7. Fukushima Fukushima 90

Kanto Area
8. Ibaraki Mito 83
9. Tochigi Utsunomiya 49
10. Gunma Maebashi 69
11. Saitama Saitama 90
12. Chiba Chiba 79
13. Tokyo Tokyo 39 (23)
14. Kanagawa Yokohama 37

Chubu Area
15. Aichi Nagoya 87
16. Toyama Toyama 35
17. Ishikawa Kanazawa 39
18. Fukui Fukui 34
19. Yamanashi Kofu 56
20. Nagano Nagano 117
21. Gifu Gifu 80
22. Shizuoka Shizuoka 69
23. Aichi Nagoya 87

Shikoku Area
36. Tokushima Tokushima 50
37. Kagawa Takamatsu 37
38. Ehime Matsuyama 62
39. Kochi Kochi 53

Kyushu Area
40. Fukuoka Fukuoka 96
41. Kagoshima Kagoshima 96
42. Oita Oita 58
43. Kumamoto Kumamoto 67
44. Miyazaki Miyazaki 44
45. Nagasaki Nagasaki 71
46. Saga Saga 49
47. Kagoshima Kagoshima 96

There are 3,100 municipalities in Japan, excluding Tokyo's 23 special wards.
(April 2004)
5. The Regional Character of Local Government

Local government in Japan is more strongly characterised as the governing entity based on the local community under its jurisdiction, rather than as an administrative body performing specific functions. In this sense, it is strongly oriented to the local community. This applies not only to municipalities as the basic units of local government, but also to the prefectures serving broader areas.

Governors, mayors, and members of local assemblies are directly elected by the communities they serve. Prefectures and municipalities have comprehensive administrative powers within their respective jurisdictions.

Although the central government’s ministries and agencies have regional branch offices, they are set up separately, without any coordination among themselves. There is no body that represents the central government as a whole in any region. This also highlights the regional nature of local government as a comprehensive administrative body.

6. The Comprehensive Empowerment of Local Government

Local authorities in Japan are fully empowered by the Local Autonomy Law to perform the unique functions and services that constitute the very purpose of their existence. Their responsibilities include providing services for the community and carrying out the activities necessary for their own existence. The enactment and implementation of bylaws and regulations, structural organisation, financial administration, and elections are a few of the main responsibilities of local government.

The Local Autonomy Law was amended in July, 1999, by the Law Concerning the Provision of Related Laws for the Promotion of Decentralisation of Power (Omnibus Decentralisation Act). This resulted in a clarification of the division of responsibility between central and local government, the abolition of the agency delegated function arrangement and the resultant restructuring of functions and a review of participation by the central government.

The division of responsibility between the central and local government was clarified by making local government responsible for a wide range of roles implemented independently and comprehensively in regional administration, while making central government responsible for functions concerning Japan’s existence as a nation in international society, functions concerning the various activities of the general public best implemented uniformly across the country, and functions relating to the basic legal framework for local government.

With the abolition of the agency delegated function arrangement, the functions of local authorities were reorganised into local government functions and statutory entrusted functions.

Statutory entrusted functions are those functions legally delegated to local authorities which were originally the responsibility of the central government or prefectures. These functions are stipulated in Appendix Tables 1 and 2 to the Local Autonomy Law, and specifically include functions such as the issuance of passports, management of national roads, and compilation of statistics for the central government or prefectures.

Local government functions comprise all other responsibilities of local authorities apart from statutory entrusted functions. These specifically include the public functions which have been the responsibility of local authorities in the past, administrative and entity delegated functions, and functions of local authorities derived from agency delegated functions.
Clearly local government’s range of functions is extremely broad, and it is no exaggeration to say that local government’s responsibilities cover all aspects of the country’s domestic life other than diplomacy, national security, trial and prosecution.

Local government expenditure is correspondingly high, with the combined expenditure of local authorities in Japan almost equaling that of the central government’s general accounts. While the central government takes in roughly half more tax revenue than local government, the enormous financial transfers from central to local in the form of the Local Allocation Tax, Local Transfer Tax, and national government disbursement support a level of local government spending nearly half more than that of the central government.

The Local Autonomy Law makes the following provisions for distribution of functions between prefectures and municipalities. Prefectures are to undertake all of the functions pertaining to an area greater than that of individual municipalities, as well as those requiring prefecture-wide or nation-wide uniformity. Municipalities carry out all other functions.

However, in reality this line of demarcation is not so clearly defined, and each tier of government shares responsibility for functions in the same field.

7. The Uniformity of Local Government

Although local authorities vary in terms of population and area, the Local Autonomy Law affords them organisational and functional uniformity— with the exception of Tokyo’s central districts, and the 13 designated cities.

This high level of uniformity is the result of two basic tenets: firstly, that the quality and level of the services provided should be similar throughout Japan, in line with those provided by the central government; and secondly, that the
circumstances specific to any one area should wherever possible be dealt with by applying nationally unified solutions, rather than by trying to set up ad hoc organisations to resolve them.

Understandably, it is then necessary to adjust local authority revenues to achieve this uniformity of service, bearing in mind the significant variation in local authority size and the corresponding financial capability. The local allocation tax system whereby the central government reallocates a certain percentage of national tax revenues to local government on the basis of financial capability was instituted for this purpose.

8. The Administrative Relationship of Central and Local Government

In Japan, local authorities are positioned within a unified system of national government comprised of central and local components. In a broad sense, central and local governments depend on and complement one another at both the prefectural and municipal levels within a region.

The Omnibus Decentralisation Act established in July 1999 has revised the comprehensive powers of control and supervision that central and prefectural governments had over municipalities, with involvement restricted to cases where it is provided for in laws or the ordinances based on such laws. Interference is kept to a minimum, and must conform to certain basic patterns. Furthermore, the laws stipulate that the autonomy and independence of local authorities must be taken into account.

Amendments to the law resulted in the abolition of the agency delegated function. In conjunction with this creation of a new relationship between the central and local government, a Central-Local Government Dispute Resolution Council has been established within the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications as a fair and impartial organisation to examine and make recommendations when disputes occur between central and local governments.

Laws relating to local government have also been amended, which has resulted in the abolition of the approval system for local government bond offerings, the creation of a system by which local government can relay its opinions concerning the calculation of Local Allocation Tax, and the abolition from the Local Tax Law of the approval system for non-statutory general taxes. Together these changes are transforming the superior/inferior and servant/master relationships between central and local government that have existed in the past into relationships based on equality and cooperation.

A revision was also undertaken of the regulations requiring creation of a uniform number of staff positions and administrative organisations in accordance with the existing legislation of the central government.

9. The Political Relationship of Central and Local Government

Central and local government in Japan are mutually dependent.

Locally there is no longer any marked difference in policies between political parties. It is not uncommon to see candidates for governor or mayor jointly recommended by parties that are in opposition at the national level. In rural and agricultural areas local assembly members are often independent conservatives.

From this it could be taken that local government is politically quite separate from central government, whereas they are in fact closely connected via the election mechanism. For conservative party politicians, their electorates or supporters’
associations are affiliated both at the national and local levels, and Diet members and local council members must cooperate to win elections. The same basically applies to political parties supported by labour unions and other organisations. Diet members and local council members from such parties also cooperate at election time.

10. The Political Process of Local Government

Governors, mayors and local councillors are directly elected. Governors and mayors take the leading role in policy-making, and have strong relationships with the elected councils.

The majority of today’s governors have either been civil servants, Diet members, high-ranking officials of local government, local councillors, or local businessmen. There was a period during the 1970s when a number of governors (some of them former scholars) were elected with the support of the reformist political parties—at a time when the problems caused by pollution and rapid urbanisation were worsening. As local authorities began to come to grips with the situation, the number of governors jointly supported by both the conservative and reformist factions increased.

The majority of local assembly members in Japan come generally from organisations concerned with agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and commerce and industry, as well as from a political party or trade union background. In the larger cities members are more characterised by their support for individual political parties, as opposed to the rural areas, where the elected members are viewed as representing the area in question, rather than a specific party. Voter turnout at local elections is generally high in rural areas, and urban political apathy certainly exists. The 1990s have seen a growing trend of governors and mayors in their 40s and 50s being elected—comparatively young as far as traditional Japanese politics is concerned.

The pollution and urbanisation problems of the 1970s led to the growth of resident action groups in many areas of Japan. These action groups tend to direct their demands directly to governors, mayors and other executive bodies. Their association with the elected council is generally not strong. Nevertheless, their demands have gradually been reflected in local policies. Today, the concerns of these groups mainly focus on environmental issues, and several local governments have held local referenda concerning these issues.
Local Authority Functions

Introduction

Most familiar day-to-day public services are the responsibility of local government. These include: family and resident registration; building and management of daycare centres, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, libraries, public halls and similar facilities; construction, maintenance and management of refuse and sewage disposal facilities, water supply and sewage works; development and improvement of roads and parks; and police and fire fighting services. Local government plays a significant role in the growth of society as a whole, as well as in the stability and improvement of people’s daily lives.

In contrast to the sectional administration of the central government’s ministries and agencies, local government provides comprehensive services in its administrative region—its local development and cultural policies are good examples of this.

Japanese society is still experiencing rapid changes. After World War II, policies were implemented to achieve economic strength on a par with that of the world’s advanced nations. This achieved, the country has entered a mature phase, while at the same time encountering many unexpected problems and challenges. One important task is that of building a society in which the individual is given priority. The role of local authorities, particularly those closest to the people, will become increasingly important in improving the quality of people’s lives and identifying the full range of popular needs.

1. Planning

Local authorities must attempt to predict the future of their respective communities, and the direction in which they ought to proceed. They must also accurately determine which measures will or will not lead to growth and to the promotion of the community’s wellbeing. However, sources of revenue are limited and do not always match the requirements.

As a result, local authorities must prioritise services in a systematic and methodical fashion. They must also look to improve the efficiency of services in order to free more funds for providing such services. Planning is therefore crucial.

The basis of local government planning is what is known as the “comprehensive plan.”

This is a three-part exercise: the first is to identify the future vision of local development as the authority sees it; the second is the planning of specific measures to turn that vision into reality; and the third is annual fiscal planning for the implementation of such measures based on a three- to five-year budget plan. In practice, however, the three separate phases are not so clearly distinguished, and one or more (and sometimes all) are often closely integrated. During a five- or ten-year period these plans are revised or updated to meet changing requirements, or when a new governor or mayor is elected.

Each prefecture prepares its own comprehensive plan, although only that of Okinawa Prefecture has a legal basis—all of the prefectures formulated their plans independently as part of the re-establishment of local government after World War II.

The Local Autonomy Law was revised in 1969, requiring the municipalities to formulate a “basic vision” with the approval of the elected council, as part of a resolve to provide comprehensive and planned administrative services. This was in line with the trend at that time of developing plans from the central to local levels, and legislated as a plan that took...
precedence over various plans under specific laws, such as the City Planning Law, within the framework of the local government system.

Comprehensive plans reflect the issues facing local government, and the objectives of the central government’s plans in any given period. Until the 1960s, policies emphasised economic growth and regional development. This then changed to an emphasis on social welfare, and more recently the focus has been on policy-making which encompasses consideration of the nature, history, culture and living environment of the region and allows people to experience real quality in their daily lives. The way in which such policies are implemented has also changed. Formerly it was government taking the lead, and now the process has shifted to the united efforts of local authorities and their residents, and even further to voluntary participation by residents. Local governments are in the process of introducing systems to evaluate administrative performance that stress efficiency and effectiveness.

2. Registration

Primarily a municipal responsibility, much of the work is done over an office counter. The public tends to measure the quality of services as a whole by the kind of counter-service it receives. At one time people strongly criticised the inefficient and unsatisfactory counter-services, which became synonymous with public services in general. Nowadays efforts have been increasing to raise standards—extended weekday hours, weekend and holiday service, and broader area services are among the measures being taken.

Local area networks and on-line systems have increasingly been introduced by local governments, mainly for registration and taxation, and there is a similar growth in the spread of information network systems, which will be accessible by residents. Some local governments have already introduced an electronic system that issues copies of resident cards and certificates of personal seals using electromagnetic cards and personal identification numbers. This will be explained further in the following sections. In order for all administrative matters to be properly automated, measures are being considered to maintain the security and confidentiality of personal information, and more and more local authorities are enacting bylaws to control access to such information.

The principal forms of registration, which are all conducted by municipalities, are described in the following sections.

2.1 Residents Registration

Resident registration was created to identify accurately the residents within a local authority’s jurisdiction. The register contains consolidated records of all residents within the community, forming a database for residence-related attestation, voter registration and other affairs concerning residents. It also makes notification procedures easy for people who have changed their addresses. The register is extensively used for the purpose of National Health Insurance, taxation, compulsory education, and vaccination.

The residents register is composed of resident cards on which statutory information on individual residents is recorded. In principle, a resident card is prepared by a municipality based on the resident’s notification.
In August 2002, a new system, the Basic Residential Register Network System (Juki Net), was created to integrate data kept by individual municipalities and make it accessible to administrative organizations throughout the country. Through this system, information needed for resident identification, i.e., resident’s name, date of birth, sex, and address, as well as resident card codes are made available, and modifications/additions to the information can be done. This system is already in operation, offering residents various services, such as the ability to receive copies of resident cards anywhere in Japan, and the simplification of administrative procedures concerning changes in residence.

Automated certificate issuing corner

(Kizu Town)
2.2 Family Registration

The family register is an important public register in terms of both public and private law. It records the legal status of people including births, deaths, parents and children, and marital status. Family registration was previously an administrative function delegated to mayors as an agency of the nation, but in accordance with revisions to the Local Autonomy Law by the Omnibus Decentralisation Act, this function is now entrusted to the localities (refer to Chapter Four 7(3), p. 51). The procedures are stipulated in detail in statutes governing family registration.

Each register is created upon notification by a resident, with the original retained by the municipality and a copy forwarded for retention by the central or local Judicial Affairs Bureau, which has jurisdiction over these matters.

2.3 Registration of Foreign Nationals

The registration of foreign nationals is a service performed to ensure the fair treatment of foreign residents by clarifying their residential and legal status. Mayors record foreign applicants in the foreign nationals register after examination of their applications.

2.4 Certification of Personal Seals

In Japan, personal seals take the place of signatures on contracts and official documents. However, seals can be duplicated, and it is thus necessary to certify that the seals in use for important documents are genuine. These certificates are issued by each municipality according to its own procedures as prescribed by its bylaws, and are a service provided for the convenience of residents.

Local government customer services in action. (Atami City, Shizuoka Prefecture)
3. Social Services

The aim of social services is to provide a quality of life for the socially disadvantaged that is on a par with that of all other members of society. Services are provided for those with special physical and mental challenges, single-parent families, children and the elderly. Social services may be divided broadly into public support, such as public financial assistance, and welfare services, such as those for children, childbirth, the elderly and those with special physical and mental challenges.

In general, the three main target areas are facilities, home-care and income. Most recently, the concept of community-based welfare has gained increasing importance.

Nearly all of the following services, which are directly and closely related to residents, are the responsibility of local government. Welfare offices are established in prefectures and cities to promote these social welfare services. Prefectural welfare offices cover areas other than cities, which are known as “gun” (counties).

3.1 Public Financial Assistance

Japan’s Public Financial Assistance System was introduced to assure a minimum standard of living by providing adequate care to those in need in order to help them lead independent lives. Assistance is available for daily living, education, housing, medical care, nursing care, childbirth, employment, funerals and ceremonies. Assistance is provided as a single type of allowance or a combination of several types of allowance depending on the circumstance of the persons in need.

Cities are responsible for public financial assistance in their respective areas, while prefectures provide for towns and villages.

3.2 Child Welfare

Child welfare services include the provision of facilities for those with special mental and physical disabilities, rehabilitation centres for children with sight, hearing and speech difficulties, as well as facilities for maternity and day-care support, and for children who have no guardians. Prefectures and designated cities also run counselling offices for children.

There is a national system that provides child allowances for low income families. Allowances were previously provided to families with pre-school children up to the age of six. However, starting in April 2004, coverage has been extended to include all children up to the third grade in elementary school (up to nine years of age).
3.3 Services for the Elderly

Japan is a rapidly ageing society, and it is forecast that early in the 21st century the percentage of elderly to the total population in Japan will reach a level unparalleled in the history of any other country.

In preparation, in 1994, the central government enacted the “New Gold Plan.” In December 1999, the government enacted the “Gold Plan 21” in line with its 5-year plan to promote the health and welfare of the elderly. This is a new 10-year plan to promote the health and welfare of the elderly, and a complete revision of the previous plan enacted in 1989.

For its part, local government is actively pursuing policies for the benefit of the elderly living at home, in addition to developing and improving facilities and services for the elderly, and helping them to lead meaningful lives.

Additionally, the Nursing Insurance System was inaugurated in April 2000. This is a comprehensive system to provide people requiring nursing care with the individual level of health and welfare services they need to carry out independent lives.

3.4 Services for Those with Special Physical and Mental Challenges

As part of a policy of “full participation,” a comprehensive range of home-care and residential services are available to help the physically challenged lead independent lives and participate fully in society.

For those with special physical and mental disabilities, for both adults and children under age 18, diverse programs are underway to build in-patient/out-patient facilities and offer home help and other services, with a view to enhancing both residential and in-home care services.
4. Social Insurance

There are five kinds of social insurance: medical, pension, unemployment, employee accident and nursing insurance. Through the Nationwide Comprehensive Health Insurance program, almost all Japanese benefit from medical and pension insurance.

4.1 Medical Insurance

There are three types of medical insurance: health insurance for private sector employees; employee insurance provided by mutual aid associations (mainly for public sector employees) and National Health Insurance (generally for the self-employed and for those engaged in agriculture). As of April 2002, the number of insured persons and their families was 126,460,000.

National Health Insurance is operated by municipalities (National Health Insurance Associations in exceptional cases), and accounts for one-third of the membership of all the medical insurance schemes in Japan.

4.2 Pension Insurance

The public pension scheme is intended to provide a minimum level of income for retired persons. Aside from the basic national pension scheme, three others are available as additional benefits: welfare pension for private sector employees, mutual aid pension for public sector employees, and the national pension scheme. While the central government manages the national pension scheme, municipalities are responsible for its registration procedures.
4.3 Unemployment Insurance

Unemployment insurance is managed by the central government, providing those able and willing to work with income to stabilise their lives while they are unemployed.

4.4 Employee Accident Insurance

Employee accident insurance also is managed by the central government. It provides annuity or lump sum benefits for employees who have suffered an occupational sickness, injury or death, to guarantee their living expenses or those of the surviving family.

4.5 Nursing Insurance

The nursing insurance system, supported by the entire society, covers all citizens enrolled in medical insurance plans provided by central or local government, as well as plans for persons over the age of 40. Persons must be 40 years of age to qualify, and those deemed eligible by local authorities to receive nursing care services will receive a level of services appropriate to their condition, ranging from in-home care to stays at nursing facilities, as stipulated in pertinent regulations.

5. Health and Hygiene Services

Health and hygiene services are designed to promote the preservation and improvement of the health of residents. Although “health and hygiene” is not strictly defined, it is generally acknowledged to include public health, environmental health, medical care and pharmaceutical matters. The central government’s responsibilities include quarantines, the licensing of medical practitioners, the specification and revision of the handling standards for pharmaceuticals, as well as the licensing of pharmaceutical manufacturers. Local government on the other hand, especially at the prefectural level, provides everyday services.

Most services are provided at public health centres—the responsibility of prefectures and designated cities (cities with statutory obligations to set up public health centres)—which carry out medical examinations, food hygiene activities, hygiene awareness programs, as well as the inspection and guidance of hotels and lodging establishments, public baths, barbershops, beauty salons and other businesses related to public health. Many prefectures and municipalities also run their own hospitals and clinics.

Health and hygiene services include services that require integrated execution or guidance covering an area greater than that of the individual municipalities, and sometimes involve authoritative administration such as the implementation of controls and the granting of approvals. Prefectures are therefore responsible for most health and hygiene services, while municipal responsibilities are limited to activities directly serving their residents such as vaccinations, the issuing of burial or cremation permits, the management of mother-and-child health centres and clinics, and district nurse services.

6. Environmental Services
Japan also had to face up to the darker side of economic prosperity—pollution, destruction of the natural environment, and so on—following its rapid growth in the late 50s and early 60s. This led to the introduction of the Environmental Pollution Prevention Law of 1967. Under its provisions, the central and local government and related organisations have been working together to devise measures to control environmental pollution.

The Law cites seven forms of typical environmental pollution: air, water, soil and noise pollution, plus vibration, subsidence and foul odours. Environmental standards have been established for the first four, and private industry, central and local government, as well as individual citizens, are all required to cooperate in controlling pollution.

For environmental conservation purposes, local authorities are engaged in regulation and guidance based on statutes, by monitoring, measuring and controlling pollution, playing an active role in fighting pollution, and through the drive to protect the natural environment.

A wide range of environmental measures have been taken recently to prevent pollution on a regional basis and preserve healthy local environments. These include policies on wastewater, everyday noise, the greening of towns and cities, the development of a more comfortable living environment, and recycling cans. Amid these activities, the central government enacted the Basic Environmental Law in 1993 to cover broad environmental issues, rather than focus on pollution controls alone. Furthermore, the Basic Law for Establishing the Recycling-based Society was passed in the year 2000. The Law’s aim is to aid in the formulation of a society geared toward sustainable development, in order to preserve the environment.

Local governments are working hard to formulate local environment management plans in step with these central government trends, as well as to make other efforts to systematically promote local environmental preservation.

Notably, through such actions as conducting environmental impact assessments and taking measures to prevent global warming, local governments are seeking to expand their efforts to preserve the environment to a global scale.

Volunteers help nurture a *buna* (beech) forest on the skirts of Mt. Hakusan.

(Ishikawa Prefecture)

7. Waste Collection and Recycling
Waste collection and recycling are basic services supporting the healthy and comfortable life of residents and are promoted in a comprehensive way based on the Fundamental Law for Establishing a Sound Material-Cycle Society.

Improved standards of living and an increase in industrial activity have led to a greater volume and wider variety of waste. There is also a growing problem in developing waste disposal facilities due to reasons such as the difficulty of finding suitable sites and the opposition of nearby residents. Illegal dumping of industrial waste is also a problem.

Accordingly, the central government has recently revised the legislation governing waste disposal and introduced laws on the development of industrial waste facilities to guarantee the proper disposal of industrial waste by improving systems and standards at industrial waste facilities.

Municipalities are responsible for the collection and disposal of general waste, including domestic refuse, bulky refuse, sewage and septic tank sludge. Disposal must be in accordance with each municipality’s own plan. However, they can permit or contract a disposal company for this purpose.

With its limited land area, Japan faces serious difficulties in relation to environmentally harmful waste and its disposal. Statutes require the producers of such waste to be responsible for its disposal, although local authorities are allowed to make certain exceptions in order to supplement the disposal of industrial waste. In any case it has become very difficult for waste producers to provide adequate disposal facilities and local authorities cannot avoid taking on ultimate responsibility in this regard.

To reduce the volume of general waste, local authorities and their respective communities are working together to reduce waste and promote recycling.

General waste disposal and the cleaning of septic tanks requires a license from the mayor. Industrial waste disposal requires a license from the governor.

8. Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Services

One of local government’s main duties is the promotion of efficient agriculture, forestry and fisheries management to enable a stable supply of food. Most of the effort is directed to ensuring that the right crops are planted in the right place—bearing in mind the topographical characteristics, human resources and market demand in each area.

8.1 Agriculture
Although the chief focus of agricultural administration in the past was on improving productivity and stabilizing the prices of agricultural products, the abolition of the Agricultural Basic Law in 1999 led to the enforcement of the Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas. Today, emphasis is on securing a stable supply of foodstuff; exercising multilateral functions, including environmental conservation; the sustainable development of agriculture; and promoting rural areas.

To implement this agricultural policy, local governments are carrying out a variety of measures. They include developing a production infrastructure, implementing structural reform, putting consumption and distribution measures into effect, developing and disseminating technology, and directly supporting mountainous regions.

In addition, organisations such as the farmers’ cooperative, a nation-wide entity, play an important role in providing guidance on farming and farm finance.

According to 2002 statistics, Japan’s total farm area is 4,760,000 hectares (more than 12 million acres), or 13% of the total land area. There are 3,750,000 people engaged in agriculture, although the total number declined sharply in the rapid economic growth period of the 50s and 60s as people migrated to live and work in the cities. Although the steady growth from the late 70s has slowed the rate of decline, the average age of agricultural workers is continuing to rise, making it crucial to recruit and train young agricultural workers. Modernisation of management methods has become another vital task as agriculture, in line with other industries, recognises the need for large-scale operations and higher productivity.

Accordingly, the emphasis has recently shifted from the conventional “hardware” oriented activities such as improvements in the agricultural infrastructure, to those more “software” oriented, for example measures to maintain an adequate number of workers, increasing the scale of agricultural management, adding more value to agricultural products, improving workers’ welfare, and vitalising farming districts.

A farmer harvesting apples. (Aomori Prefecture)

8.2 Forestry
In 2002, the total area of forested and non-agricultural land amounted to 25,120,000 hectares (about 62 million acres) or 67% of the total land area; of this, state-owned forests accounted for 7,840,000 hectares, and the rest 17,280,000 hectares. Local authorities owned 2,800,000 hectares.

Public sector forestry is split between land conservation, and the protection and cultivation of forest resources, including promotion of the regional forestry industry. The central government has responsibility for nation-wide mountain and water management planning, forest planning and state-owned forest management. Prefectures are responsible for the maintenance of mountainous areas, forest protection and forest road networks, based on the central government’s plan. Municipalities are undertaking the general promotion of forest protection and cultivation.

There are also many local organisations independently engaged in forest management to develop their own assets and to protect and cultivate forest resources.

In recent years forestry has seen hard times owing to a prolonged lull in the demand for timber, reductions in the local workforce, and the growing pressure from increasingly competitive imported timber as the value of the yen has continued to rise. On the other hand, there is a growing trend toward taking a fresh look at forest resources from the perspective of promoting healthy, cultural and educational use of forests, or that of conserving and nurturing of the natural environment. There is a growing demand for more policies that take such perspectives into account.

8.3 Fisheries

Annual fisheries production exceeded 10 million tons in every year from 1972 to 1990, but then fell below that mark in 1991, to 9.98 million tons. The slide in production has continued since that time, to 5.88 million tons in 2002. Imports of marine products are now growing steadily in terms of both volume and cost—for example, lobster, prawn and shrimp, which make up the largest portion of imported seafood in terms of cost, totalled 240,000 tons in 2003, with a value of some 248.1 billion yen.

Each year sees a decline in the number of persons employed in the fishing industry—in 2002 those employed totalled 240,000. The majority are self-employed fishermen, typically operating on a very small scale, and for the most part engaged in coastal fishing.
In such circumstances local authorities work to help stabilise small businesses and revitalise the fishing communities, rather than support fisheries run by large companies. Local government’s main involvement is in improving and developing harbour facilities and fishing technologies, as well as expanding fishing reefs to encourage the growth of coastal fishing. At the same time specific measures are being taken to help the small-scale coastal fishermen.

Preparations for releasing stocks of *kurumaebi* (prawn) fry. (Okayama Prefecture)

9. Services for Commerce and Industry

Support for commerce and industry is primarily for small and medium-sized enterprises. Japan’s commercial and industrial structure is characterised by its duality—capital-intensive big business with high productivity and labour-intensive smaller companies with low productivity. While small businesses played an important part in the country’s economic growth and in people’s daily lives, the environment in which they operate has undergone dramatic changes as a result of: the dominance of large companies in terms of capital, development capability and marketing skills; the ever greater importance of globalisation and the changes that this has induced in Japan’s economic structure; and the increasing difficulty of securing loans in the midst of Japan’s current economic stagnation.

It is therefore necessary to help smaller businesses achieve sound growth through upgrading and technical training. However, they find it hard to raise capital from private financial institutions, since they cannot command the same level of credit-worthiness as can big companies. For this reason, a financial system was established to enable central and local government, as well as government financial institutions, to provide low-interest loans to small businesses. In addition, local authorities promote local industries that utilise local resources as a means of creating employment.
Local authorities are also actively improving commercial and industrial management methods, building industrial complexes to attract inward investment, undertaking commercial and industrial research, and formulating policies to improve consumption and distribution, as well as promoting tourism. Municipalities have their local chambers of commerce and industry, as well as commerce and industry associations, for mutual aid and information sharing between members.

10. Urban Development

Urbanisation has continued apace for the past 40 years, and although it may have slowed recently, it is generally accepted that it will continue.

Of the more than 127 million people who inhabit Japan’s 377,000 square kilometres, half of them live in just 14% of the total land area—the three large urban areas called the Tokyo, Kansai and Nagoya areas. The Tokyo area (Tokyo Metropolis and Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba Prefectures) had a population of 33 million people; the Kansai area (Osaka, Kyoto, Hyogo and Nara Prefectures) had 18 million; while the Nagoya area (Aichi, Gifu and Mie Prefectures) had 11 million.

Of these, Tokyo and the Tokyo area have the highest concentration of population, and as a result the highest concentration of functions for the economy, information, education, culture and entertainment. This concentration has even spawned a new term in Japan—“unipolar concentration in Tokyo.”

Unfortunately, the standard of the urban infrastructure in Japan, in terms of roads, parks and sewerage, is still lower than that of Western European and American countries, since the history of urban development has been a short one and urbanisation came so rapidly. This partly explains the feeling among the Japanese that their life-style is lagging behind the country’s acknowledged economic power.
Systematic urban development will go a long way toward achieving a sound, vital and comfortable urban environment and a higher quality of life for Japan’s citizens. Development of local cities will also correct the concentration in Tokyo and promote a more balanced national land development, by way of creating a multipolar, dispersed nation.

The urban development programs of local authorities follow an area approach, such as land re-zoning and redevelopment, with an emphasis on city planning based on the City Planning Law.

Prefectural governors and mayors of designated cities are responsible for designating city areas in need of improvement, development and maintenance, and for specifying which urban areas should be systematically developed to promote urbanization, as well as which should be controlled. All development, according to its scale and purpose, is subject to the approval of prefectural governors or the mayors of designated, core, or special cities.
Mayors are responsible for formulating city plans, which are subject to public hearings and inspection, and to screening by city planning committees held at the prefectural level, before they are finally approved.

The “Yokohama Minato Mirai 21” waterfront redevelopment project.
(Kanagawa Prefecture)

11. Infrastructure and Public Housing

Local authorities prepare town and city plans and their associated basic development programs to promote the improvement of various urban facilities, as well as area development and construction.

11.1 Roads

Road expenditures account for the highest proportion of local authorities’ construction budgets.

Under the law, roads in Japan are classified into four types: national expressways, national highways, prefectural roads and municipal roads. The Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport is responsible for managing and maintaining national expressways, as well as national highways, although some national highways are the responsibility of the governors or mayors of designated cities. Prefectures or designated cities are responsible for prefectural roads, and municipalities for municipal roads. National expressways and highways represent only a small proportion of the nation’s roads, more than 95% of which are the responsibility of local government.

The percentage of paved roads and roads wide enough to comfortably accommodate two-way traffic is still lower for municipal roads than for those with a prefectural or national classification.

11.2 Rivers

River management encompasses the maintenance and improvement of rivers, as well as flood control.

Rivers are categorised in four types: 1st and 2nd class rivers, to which the River Law applies, other rivers to which this Law applies (with appropriate amendments), and ordinary rivers to which the Law does not apply. Rivers are classified according to their importance in terms of land preservation and national economy, and in terms of various public interests.
First class rivers are managed either by the Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport or by governors; 2nd class by governors; and those others to which the River Law applies, by mayors of municipalities.

Dam construction for flood prevention is a vital undertaking of local authorities, as well as water supply for human consumption and agriculture.

Recently, however, rivers are being seen more as public amenities, and efforts are now being directed towards improving water quality and riverside roads. At the same time, riverside parks are being developed as people recognise the importance of preserving riparian environments.

11.3 Sewerage

One of the most promoted projects among local authorities in Japan is the improvement of the nation's sewerage systems, which had lagged behind those in Europe and America.

Prefectures are involved in the construction, maintenance and management of river basin sewerage, while municipalities look after public and urban sewerage channels. Both authorities have passed bylaws to regulate sewage management and are empowered to require the installation of pre-treatment facilities by parties discharging water that fails to meet the legal standards. They can also carry out inspections at wastewater treatment or pre-treatment facilities and can charge fees for sewerage services.

As sewerage-related projects, rural towns and villages and farming areas are working to improve drainage in farming communities, installing communal septic tanks, and introducing flush toilet systems to improve the quality of life as well as preserve the natural environment.

11.4 Housing

Japan’s housing supply almost meets demand, and quality has improved, but standards are still lower than in most of Europe and the United States. Thus, improving housing standards is still a major issue. The emphasis of housing policy is now on building more comfortable, better quality homes, rather than simply building in large numbers.
Public housing is provided according to local authorities’ five-year housing development plans, and homes for sale and for rent are built by the Urban Development Corporation, as well as by the local governments’ Public Corporation for Housing Supply. Additionally, amid changes in the social conditions that affect housing, such as declining birth rates leading to an ageing society and a diversification of lifestyles, efforts are being made in recent years to formulate a comprehensive housing policy that includes measures that address the economy, urban issues and the ageing society.

12. Police Services

Until World War II, police services in Japan were a state responsibility; after the War, almost all services were assigned to the prefectures. Today the central government remains responsible for the National Public Safety Commission and for the National Police Agency which together plan and coordinate police services and for cultural education, communications and criminal identification. All other activities familiar to residents are carried out by the prefectures. Each prefecture has its own Public Safety Committee and the Prefectural Police Headquarters is responsible for police stations as well as police-boxes which are more familiar to local residents.

Responding to residents at a local police post. (Shizuoka Prefecture)

Routine police activities include: crime prevention activities such as patrol, control and guidance on door locking; crime suppression and investigation; arresting suspects; protection activities for people in a weak position, such as children, the elderly and runaways; traffic control; and maintenance of public safety and order. Also, in each police-box and at other locations, officers give directions and deal with lost property. Further, in order to protect the safety of the living environment of residents, police administration includes cleanup measures to preserve the morality of public spaces.

Traffic-related activities have taken up a large portion of police services in recent years. With increasingly brisk economic activities and improvement of the national income, road traffic has become an inseparable element of people’s daily lives, but at the same time it is accompanied by problems of traffic accidents, congestion and pollution.
Nearly 282,000 people were accepted into the police force in April 2004 to run prefectural police departments as well as 6,600 police-boxes throughout Japan.

13. Fire Services

Fire services are responsible for firefighting, as well as dealing with incidents arising from earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. Before the World War II, firefighting was a police function; after the War, municipalities took over most of the role (although the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is the main provider of these services in Tokyo).

Major activities include fire prevention, firefighting, flood control and rescue during monsoons and typhoons, and providing an ambulance service for traffic accidents and emergencies.

Municipalities are improving their preparedness to deal with major disasters, such as fires caused by earthquakes, forest fires, hurricane and flood damage, oil-refinery explosions, fires at sea resulting from tanker collisions and oil spills, and air disasters. For this purpose they are concluding mutual support agreements with other municipalities, or joining forces and creating joint firefighting organisations. Prefectures are also strengthening their firefighting/disaster prevention set-ups, and building working relationships with the police, the Self-Defense Forces and other relevant bodies for cooperation and support.

Generally, fire services are provided by both the regular, full-time fire brigades and voluntary brigades, although lately it is the regular brigades who predominate.

Firefighters at work. (Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture)

14. Education
The Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law were enacted as part of Japan’s post-war education reforms, which established the present school system comprising six years at primary school, three years at lower secondary (junior high) and upper secondary (senior high) schools respectively, and four years at universities.

Nine years of compulsory education (primary school and junior high school) became the norm, and equal educational opportunities for all are strongly promoted, as is clearly illustrated by the marked increase in the percentage of students continuing on to senior high school—42.5% in 1950, to 82.1% in 1970, 94.2% in 1980, and 97.3% in 2003. The system provides every child throughout Japan with the same level of compulsory education based on standards laid down by central government. In 2002, new standards introducing a 5-day school week system were adopted. The new system is designed to ensure that children acquire basic, fundamental knowledge and foster their desire to learn and think on their own. Primary and lower secondary school education is a municipal responsibility.

Based on the Law on Organisations and Functions of Local Educational Administration, prefectural and municipal boards of education are responsible for providing local education. Boards of education are autonomous, independent from governors or mayors, and are responsible for all related matters—from establishment and management of schools to staff appointments—except budget-making, which rests with governors and mayors, who also appoint board of education members, with council approval. Governors have legal authority over private elementary schools, lower and upper secondary schools, and other miscellaneous schools.

Of all elementary and lower secondary schools 97% are public, and 3% are private; whilst 76% of upper secondary schools are public and 24% private. Most public upper secondary schools are founded by prefectures, which may also establish special schools, including those for students with sight and hearing difficulties.

In educational administration, social education is considered as important as academic, and local authorities provide a wide range of services, including various courses, forums and classes, as well as establishing and managing libraries, public halls and museums, arranging youth education and providing equipment for sports and recreation. Social education will gain importance as the population ages and people find themselves with more leisure time.

The concept of lifelong education is firmly rooted, and providing the relevant opportunities will be a vital task for local government.
A foreign language class (Tokushima Prefecture)
15. Local Public Enterprises and Third Sector Companies

15.1 Local Public Enterprises

Local authorities are involved in a variety of corporate enterprises, including water supply and sewerage, public transport, health care, and others—all a necessary part of daily life and all contributing to growth at the local level.

The generic term applied to such bodies is “local public enterprises.” In addition to those mentioned, electricity and gas supply, wholesale markets, slaughterhouses, and port development are typical enterprise activities. Recently, widespread diversification has added tourist facilities such as ski slopes, residential land development and wine-making—all taking advantage of special local characteristics.

Although such enterprises are generally part of local government, the emphasis on efficient and streamlined management sets them apart from usual day-to-day local authority operations. Local public enterprises are run by corporate managers who are the equivalent of presidents in private companies, and they have to set up special accounts. A local government’s operation costs are usually funded by tax revenues, but public enterprises charge customers for their services to cover ongoing costs.

The Japan Finance Corporation for Municipal Enterprises was established to provide secure loans to local public enterprises.

The Bureau of Waterworks. (Aichi Prefecture)

15.2 Third Sector Companies
As public requirements grow more diverse and sophisticated, local authorities are experimenting with a number of approaches: one is known as the “third sector” system. Third sector companies differ from the public and the private sector, although they are designed to benefit from the functions and advantages of both.

In the late 1960s many third sector bodies were set up as the principal organisations in large-scale projects, utilising private sector financing capability and project know-how. Since then the areas in which such organisations operate have gradually expanded: third sector companies have been set up recently to handle work commissioned by local authorities, such as the management of public facilities, and they have also been introduced in other areas such as resort development. Since the 1980s, systems were established to actively engage the vitality of the private sector which, together with the energetic approach of local authorities to local development, led to an increase in the number of such companies at the end of the decade.

Although the third sector system was created to benefit from the best aspects of both the public and private sectors, some companies have been beset with financial difficulties due to poor management or problems originating from their incorporation. This situation requires an in-depth study of the issue on the part of local authorities.
The Challenges Facing Local Government

1. Coping with an Ageing Population

Perhaps the most formidable task facing Japan is how to cope with its ageing population. Statistically, the population of Japan is ageing faster than anywhere else in the world. In 2003, 19.0% of the population is now age 65 or older, and this proportion is certain to rise.

In comparison with other countries, the estimated number of years required for the percentage of the aged in the population to increase from 7% to 14% (considered the standard indication of an aged society) is 115 years in France and about 85 years in Sweden, with relatively shorter periods of 40 years and about 47 years for Germany and England, respectively, whereas the figure drops to only 24 years for Japan.

This shorter period can be attributed to two main factors. The first is the increased average life-span of the Japanese. This has risen remarkably since 1935 when men had a life expectancy of no more than 46.9 years, and women 49.6. In 2002, life expectancy for men had reached 78.32, and women 85.23 years.

The second factor is the reduced birth-rate. In 2002 the average was 1.32—much lower than the 2.08 required to maintain the present level of population. This will in turn lead to a lower percentage of younger people in the population.

The speed of ageing is not the same nation-wide and significant local differences can be observed. For example, the phenomenon is markedly worse in municipalities in depopulated areas which young people have been leaving. In such areas an increasing number of municipalities are reaching ratios of 20% or higher, and some are extremely affected at 40% or more. These communities are often facing other difficulties such as deteriorating environmental management of forest and farming areas, collapse of the community itself, and a loss of historical climate or culture. This could threaten the continued existence of regional society. Such a collapse could have serious impact throughout Japan, for example flood damage caused by the decreased water-holding capacity of devastated forest areas.

A ring-toss event at the Silver Sports Festival. (Tochigi Prefecture)
The following challenges face an ageing society: first, an increased need to build a new social system to match the changing pattern of family life, and the increased burden on those still employed; second, providing employment for the elderly; third, financial stability and meaningful lives for the elderly; and lastly, the health and care of the elderly.

Central and local governments must work closely together to find solutions. Local government needs to develop appropriate policies based on changes in the population structure, rather than rely on conventional welfare planning. Such policies should at the very least include measures to encourage an increase in the birth-rate and to provide employment opportunities for the elderly, as well as to help them lead useful and interesting lives.

2. Local Community Development

After World War II, Japan achieved high economic growth and dramatic improvement of living standards. Unfortunately the excessive concentration of people and businesses pursuing economic efficiency in the main urban areas brought about a number of problems, including air and water pollution, noise, subsidence, traffic congestion, soaring land prices, the loss of local traditions, and the spread of an “efficiency-first” attitude.

Rural and fishing communities are losing many of their young people and most of their workforce to the large cities, leaving only children and the elderly and putting the communities’ existence at risk.

Policies to revitalise local communities are needed if a proper balance between urban and rural development is to be maintained.

The central government has made five National Comprehensive Development Plans since 1962 and promoted many relevant policies. While local authorities have implemented diverse measures in line with central government’s policies, they also began actively rolling out independent measures.

“Local community development” is broadly described: it refers to the promotion and revitalisation of many elements associated with residents’ daily lives, including the local government process itself, as well as such things as local culture
and tradition, and not just to improvements in the local economy. The process must therefore be both comprehensive and horizontal in approach, rather than depending on the more vertical approach of central government policies.

The “local specialty product” scheme that originated in Oita Prefecture is one example of a typical local development policy that has spread throughout Japan. Its overall objective is for each municipality and community to develop and nurture local products (including tourism and culture) that will appeal to people all over the country, and so contribute to the local economy. More importantly, people develop pride in their local area through such activities, and this in turn will become their motivation for local development. This process is considered the most important thing.

Future measures must be designed to improve residents’ awareness, to revitalise local communities and improve the urban and living environment in general, in addition to contributing to local economies.

As an example of its support for local government efforts in this area, central government, i.e., the Ministry of Home Affairs (the present Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), introduced in 1989 a project called “Let’s Think How We Can Develop Our Local Area”—now known as the “100 Million Yen Hometown Development,” which continues to this day. Unlike conventional projects planned and produced centrally, this one is based on local authorities’ original ideas and supported by central government. This allows local authorities to implement development activities in which their regional public can participate.

3. International Relationships

Rapid improvements in transport and communications of late have enhanced the mobility of people, goods and information to a global level, resulting in the building of close relationships that reach beyond conventional boundaries, and an increase in mutual assistance. There are calls domestically as well as from abroad for Japan to be afforded a proper position worthy of its economic power in the international arena. The role Japan should play in the international community is growing larger.

Domestic daily life is increasingly influenced by international factors, for instance: the country’s dependence on imported food and raw materials; trade conflicts; hollowing-out of the manufacturing sector by companies moving production overseas; the rapid growth in overseas travel; increase in the numbers of Japanese citizens living abroad; increase in the numbers of foreign nationals residing in Japan; and increase in the numbers of Japanese children educated abroad. The extent of globalisation is such that the boundaries between domestic and international issues are fading and they are becoming more closely related and interwoven.

International relationships, once the preserve of national governments, are now commonplace for local authorities, private organisations, as well as for ordinary individuals. In some fields an independent local-level approach is exactly what is required.

Taking international exchange activities as just one example, multi-layered, citizen-level grass-roots exchanges are viewed as more important for enhancing mutual understanding than official exchanges at the national level. Exchange activities have grown to take more diverse forms from the former emphasis on twinning (sister cities, friendly cities) alone, for example: exchanges at the resident level including youth and female residents; cultural and sporting exchanges; technological and academic exchanges involving, among others, acceptance of trainees from developing countries; and industrial and economic exchanges.
Local authorities are responsible for overall regional administration and possess the necessary expertise and technology. With the use of these resources, international exchange has the potential to evolve from “exchange” to “cooperation.”

Local government has established the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations in conjunction with the Ministry of Home Affairs (the present Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications), to assist local authorities in their international dealings and to promote, among others, the JET Program, which invites to Japan young people from around the world to help as foreign language teachers in Japanese schools.

In the future, local authorities will need to define their own objectives of international involvement and exchange, establish a system to promote citizen-led programs, compile associated information and knowledge, and equip individuals with adequate skills to cope with this trend.
4. A Better Quality of Life

Local authority urban programs are increasingly moving away from “hardware” activities such as road construction and the development of parks, to comprehensive improvement and maintenance of the residential environment including “software” activities.

In the background are the negative aspects of the progress of national development and urbanisation that accompanied the country’s high economic growth. Some of Japan’s formerly rich green areas have been lost. There have been water pollution, deterioration of the waterside environment, collapse of urban and rural communities, and loss of traditional culture. Many areas have lost their once beautiful scenery.

This shift in emphasis has grown from the awareness that Japan’s economic miracle was achieved at the cost of something very precious.

Administrative policies with the foregoing emphasis may be collectively called amenity-related programs. Creation of comfortable urban environments; protection and nurturing of urban beauty and charm; preservation of urban areas with historic value; creation of urban landscapes; protection and preservation of clean water, beautiful greenery and skies; promotion of city planning that gives appropriate priority to the natural environment—all these are included in amenity-related programs.

The beginning of amenity-conscious administration can be traced back to the late 1960s when people became aware of the destruction of environments with historical heritage, and citizens’ movements for preservation (in a form similar to a national trust) sprang up across the country. As a result, municipalities adopted independent bylaws and implemented policies to protect areas with historic value. This in turn led to the enactment of similar legislation, and revision of associated laws at the national level. In addition to the protection of areas with historic value, an increasing number of local authorities are presently adopting bylaws and plans concerning tree preservation, promotion of tree-planting, and protection of noted clean water sources as part of conservation of natural environment. They are also enacting bylaws for the protection of urban landscapes including roads and streetscapes.

Innovative local authorities have implemented policies that actively promote the creation of quality urban areas in addition to the emphasis on environmental conservation, which is more or less a preventive measure.

Many authorities are also adopting environmental policies that take into account the global environment as well as their local environments as part of their amenity-related programs. Global-oriented local environmental policies ranging from waste recycling and construction of recycling facilities to combating global warming will become even more important in the future.
5. Cultural Promotion

Culture-related services were introduced around 1978 when the key phrase was “the age of localism.” As the nation’s economy grew, local areas found themselves increasingly reliant on one-way flow of economic activities and information from Tokyo. In an effort to counter this situation, the revival of local life-styles, traditions and cultures was promoted.

The following sections give some idea of the range and scope of local authorities’ activities in this area.

5.1 Cultural Facilities

Activities include: construction of world-class halls designed exclusively for music and theatrical performances, as well as multi-purpose cultural halls; and art galleries, museums and literary collections, each with its own unique and individual identity.

5.2 Culturally Aware Urban Development

Efforts include urban planning with more emphasis on aesthetic beauty, pleasure, individuality, and comfort, rather than the single-minded pursuit of function and economic efficiency.

5.3 Organisational Variety
Activities include: the management of cultural halls by third sector companies; the establishment of prefectural cultural promotion foundations and public corporations responsible for the promotion of popular culture; the provision of cultural promotion funding; and landscape regulation.

5.4 Cultural Diversity

A wide variety of events are being held including outdoor sculpture exhibitions, international film festivals, world drama festivals, popular music festivals, children’s song festivals, kite flying contests, historic area fairs, snow festivals, sand festivals, and food and culture festivals.

The historic Chofu District of Shimonoseki City.
(Yamaguchi Prefecture)

5.5 Restoration of History and Tradition

Movements are underway to restore local history and tradition and preserve historic buildings and areas, enacting bylaws for conservation of cultural assets.

5.6 Educational Tourism

A new kind of tourism is giving tourists an opportunity to learn about local culture and fostering the development of tourism from the perspective of local hospitality.

5.7 Local Identity
Efforts are in place to cultivate or enhance local identity by the use of titles such as “Music City,” “Theatre City,” “Information City,” “Village of Fairy Tales,” “History Town” and “Village of Shining Stars.” Prefectural and municipal CI (community identity) programs follow the example of the corporate identity programs in businesses.

5.8 Community-based Exchanges and Skills Training

Activities include holding cultural forums and symposiums, providing funding for skills development, dispatching trainees to other areas of Japan or abroad, and renewing and revitalising sister city arrangements and similar activities.

5.9 Review of Administrative Business from a Cultural Perspective

A cultural perspective is being introduced to services at the counter, government documents, information signs, pamphlets and personnel training, etc.

In these and other ways, culture-related services have expanded considerably from the limited activities of the central government’s Agency for Cultural Affairs, or local authorities’ education boards’ culture sections. Culture-related services are able to encompass a wide range of activities in their pursuit of developing local communities with cultural identities that make the residents want to continue living there, and able to be proud of living there.

6. Residents’ Participation and Access to Information

As Japan’s society has grown more complex and people’s thinking and sense of values become increasingly diverse, local authorities have seen the need for new ways of keeping in touch with their respective communities. It is no longer enough to rely on outmoded and ill-used systems of recall and residents’ votes, nor simply to rely on elected members and the council process.

Today a variety of methods are used to guarantee that popular opinion is considered fully when projects or services are planned and implemented: symposiums or informal gatherings are held in each area, questionnaire surveys are undertaken, and people are encouraged to voice their opinions and ideas.
To reflect popular opinion directly in day-to-day services in addition to project planning and execution, especially at the municipal level, informal meetings with the mayor are held, citizens’ committees are organised and suggestion boxes are made available to give everyone a chance to voice their opinions.

Prefectural and municipal governments have recently enacted disclosure of information bylaws and, at the behest of local citizens, are actively making government information available.

By allowing access to information, local authorities are also helping to maintain public relations by letting residents confirm that the administrative work is being done appropriately.

7. In Step with Advances in the IT Revolution

The IT revolution is sweeping through all parts of society, from the economic and industrial sectors to government administration, which lays the foundation of society. This can be seen in the sophisticated application of information technology in the development of “e-government” and “local e-governments.” With the establishment of the Basic Plan for the Computerisation of Government Administration in 1997 and the approval of the e-Government Construction Plan in July 2003, concrete action to develop an e-government and local e-governments has been planned for systematic implementation.
As part of this project, a local government wide area network (LGWAN)—a general administrative network that interconnects approximately 3,200 local governments throughout Japan—was developed to facilitate smoother communication among government entities, establish a foundation for advanced information use through sharing, and connect local government organisations throughout the country. In addition, it has been connected with the interministerial network “Kasumigaseki WAN” for data exchange with national government organisations.

At the same time, advances in the IT revolution have increased the need for stricter security measures, with those against cyber attacks, web page tampering, Internet crimes, and cyber terrorism emerging as international issues. In the present sophisticated information society and amid continuing advances in information technology, security and reliability are in great demand along with convenience. To guarantee these needs are met, a multifaceted approach to development in terms of system, technology, management, etc., is necessary. At the same time, a mechanism adapted to the new IT society is needed as well. Local government entities must increasingly be able to adapt accordingly and keep in step with advances in the IT revolution in the future.
The Mechanism of Local Government

Introduction

Japan is divided into 47 prefectural areas, which are further sub-divided into municipalities. There are no overlapping areas nor any gaps between prefectures and between municipalities. In other words, every resident in Japan lives in both a prefecture and a municipality.

Prefectures and municipalities were not established as mere administrative areas of the country. They are corporate entities based on geographical locations with the residents living in their respective areas as their constituents, independent of the central government, and fully capable of carrying out their respective duties within their respective areas.

Under the heading of “Local Autonomy,” Chapter 8 of Japan’s Constitution guarantees local autonomy, and describes the basic principles of local government. Article 92 of the Constitution reads, “Regulations concerning organisation and operations of local public entities shall be fixed by law in accordance with the principle of local autonomy.” Various laws relating to local government have been established based on this provision, among them the Local Autonomy Law, the fundamental law on local government.

Since the Constitution guarantees the system of local government in Japan, no national law can abolish all local authorities or create a single centralised state without a constitutional amendment.

1. Local Authority Classification

Local authorities are legally classified as “ordinary” or “special”; prefectures and municipalities are ordinary local authorities, whereas the special authorities include special wards, unions of local public entities, property wards and local development corporations.

1.1 Ordinary Local Authorities

Ordinary local authorities share a common organisation, area of responsibility and power, and are present throughout Japan. Prefectures and municipalities are ordinary authorities.

1.1 (a) Prefectures

A prefecture is a local government public entity covering a wide area, encompassing multiple municipalities. There are 47 prefectures in Japan.

In Japanese, Tokyo is the only prefecture called “to,” or metropolis. Tokyo is the capital city of Japan and differs from the rest of the prefectures in that it has a system of special wards.

Hokkaido is the only prefecture known as “do,” or region, while Kyoto and Osaka prefectures are “fu”; the rest are known as “ken.”

These differences in nomenclature are purely historical—there are in effect no systematic differences between “do,” “fu” and “ken.”
Prefectural responsibilities are as follows:

(i) functions over a wide area, for example drafting comprehensive local development plans, forest conservancy and river improvements;

(ii) functions involving communication between the central government and municipalities, or entailing advice and guidance for municipalities, for example making recommendations on streamlining organisation and management;

(iii) functions whose scale of operation is deemed inappropriate for municipalities, for example the establishment and management of upper secondary schools and hospitals.

1.1 (b) Municipalities
At the lower tier of local government, municipalities provide the basic services most familiar to the public. As of April 2004, there were 3,100 municipalities.

A municipality must satisfy certain conditions to be considered a city, including a population requirement of at least 50,000.

Towns and villages are usually found in so-called counties (“gun” in Japanese), but the title is purely geographical and has no administrative significance. Towns are more urbanised, with more persons engaged in commerce and industry, but in terms of administrative functions and authority there are no differences.

Municipalities provide the following services:

(i) functions related to day-to-day matters, for example resident and family registration, residence designation and various certificates;

(ii) functions concerned with public health and safety and environmental conservation, for example fire services, refuse and sewage disposal, water supply, and public parks;

(iii) functions connected with urban development, for example city planning, construction and maintenance of roads, rivers and other public facilities;

(iv) functions concerning the establishment and management of various municipal facilities, including public halls, nurseries, primary and lower secondary schools, and libraries.

1.1 (c) Prefectural/Municipal Relationships
Prefectures and municipalities are mutually independent entities. The legal relationship between them is not one of superior and subordinate. The scope of their functions differs, however, because of the difference in their basic nature. While a prefecture is a regional public entity covering a wide area that includes multiple municipalities within that area, a municipality is a basic unit of local government closely related to people’s daily lives. Prefectures may give local municipalities various guidance and advice from a wider regional perspective. Some prefectural business involves granting approvals to municipalities.

1.1 (d) Designated Cities
Cities that have populations of 500,000 or more and are approved by cabinet order are defined by the Local Autonomy Law as designated cities. In practice, however, cities with population of one million or more or with population of 800,000 or more but expected to reach one million in the future are being designated as such. Presently, there are 13 designated cities:
Osaka, Nagoya, Kyoto, Yokohama, Kobe, Kitakyushu, Sapporo, Kawasaki, Fukuoka, Hiroshima, Sendai, Chiba and Saitama. (Shizuoka City is scheduled to become a new designated city in April 2005.)

Designated cities are authorised to administer the same level of governmental jurisdiction as prefectures in 19 policy areas including social welfare, public health, and urban planning. Some laws also delegate to the designated cities authority in such areas as national road management and compulsory education.

1.1 (e) Core Cities
Cities that have populations of at least 300,000 but less than 500,000 and land areas of over 100 sq km and are designated by cabinet order are known as core cities. There were 35 such core cities, as of April 2004.

In addition to establishing public health centres, the core cities may undertake all of the functions delegated to the designated cities with the exception of those which may be more efficient if handled in an integrated manner by prefectures.

1.1 (f) Special Case Cities
Cities that have populations over 200,000 and are designated by cabinet order are known as special case cities. The system for special case cities took effect on April 1, 2000, and there were 40 such cities as of April 2004.

Special case cities are delegated the same functions as core cities with the exception of those that may be more efficiently handled in an integrated manner by prefectures. One example would be granting permission for development projects in accordance with the City Planning Law.

1.2 Special Local Authorities

So called because of their special nature and circumstances, the following types of special local authorities exist.

1.2 (a) Special Wards
These are found only in Tokyo—Chiyoda or Shinjuku Ward for example—and there are 23 in all.

Their functions are similar to municipalities. There are some exceptions; for example, fire services, ordinarily a municipal responsibility, are provided by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, the prefectural authority.

Mayors and councillors of wards are directly elected.

1.2 (b) Municipal Cooperatives
Municipal cooperatives are usually formed by two or more municipalities to carry out functions that would be more effective and efficient than if provided alone.

The following types of cooperatives are possible, although at present no examples of (iii) or (iv) are in operation:

(i) partial cooperatives formed to provide specific services such as the establishment and management of schools and hospitals;
(ii) wide-area unions formed to plan and provide services over a wide area in a comprehensive and systematic manner;
(iii) administrative cooperatives formed to carry out all the administrative duties of a number of towns and villages;
(iv) full cooperatives formed to carry out all the services of a number of towns and villages.

1.2 (c) Property Wards
These are special authorities formed by certain property-owning areas or districts within a municipality for the purposes of property management. Property wards are fairly common in farming or mountain villages, but less so in urban areas.

The most common properties involved are mountain forests, while others include irrigation channels, marshland, cemeteries, housing land, farms, and hot springs.

1.2 (d) Local Development Corporations
Formed by two or more ordinary local authorities, local development corporations are set up specifically to acquire and prepare sites for the construction of public facilities in areas subject to comprehensive development plans.

Tokyo’s City/Ward System

Distribution of functions
The Tokyo Metropolitan Government carries out prefectural functions within the boundaries of the wards, as well as municipal functions (fire fighting, water supply and sewerage, refuse collection and disposal). The special wards are responsible for other city functions.

Distribution of funds
Municipal taxes such as fixed property taxes, municipal corporate taxes, and special land holding taxes are considered Tokyo Metropolitan district taxes. Treated as revenue for the city and wards, they are distributed among them according to an adjustment
2. Local Authority Organisation

An ordinary local authority consists of an executive branch and a legislature. The legislature (the elected council) determines budgets, enacts local legislation and makes decisions on its policies. It includes the prefectural or municipal assembly.

The executive branch implements the policies decided by the legislature. It includes governors, mayors and their executive committees.

Local government in Japan is based on the presidential system, where governors, mayors, and councillors are directly elected, and functions on the principle of a separation of powers and internal checks and balances to ensure democratic local administration.

To prevent the over-concentration of power in one place, the executive branch also includes a number of administrative committees independent of the governor or mayor, for example, boards of education, or public safety, and election committees. These committees are wholly responsible for the management of their respective functions.

3. Governors and Mayors

Governors and mayors are directly elected to serve four-year terms. They are not permitted to simultaneously serve as members of the Diet or local councillors, or to be regular officials. They cannot act as contractors to the local authority.

They are responsible for ensuring the overall consistency of the local authority’s services and functions, and are authorised to represent the authority externally. Governors and mayors thus exercise general control over other executive organs such as administrative committees.
Important powers given to local chief executives include rights to enact regulations, to draft budgets, to introduce bills, and to appoint members of administrative committees such as the board of education and public safety committee, as well as vice governors, deputy mayors, a chief accountant, treasurer, and other officials of their respective local authorities.

In addition to these powers, governors and mayors are responsible for the execution of all affairs of the local authority excluding those of the elected council and the administrative committees. It does not mean, however, that they personally carry out all these broad functions. To assist them in actual execution, there are vice governors (deputy mayors for municipalities) and a chief accountant (treasurer for municipalities), and a large number of divisions, departments and sections, carrying out their respective assigned duties.

### 4. Administrative Committees

Administrative committees are as follows:

#### 4.1 Boards of Education

Prefectures and municipalities each have their own Board of Education. Members hold office for four years and are appointed by the governor or mayor, with council approval. Boards are responsible for, and have power to execute, affairs concerning education (e.g., establishment and management of schools and other educational institutions, appointment of school staff), science and culture.

To manage the affairs of a board of education, a superintendent of education is appointed by the board. The superintendent is responsible for executing all affairs of the board under its direction and supervision.

#### 4.2 Public Safety Committees
Prefectural bodies not established in municipalities, whose members are appointed by governors with council approval to serve three-year terms, public safety committees supervise prefectural police headquarters (the Metropolitan Police Department in Tokyo) and the services they provide.

4.3 Election Committees

Election committees are established in every prefecture and municipality. Members are elected at council meetings from among electors and serve four-year terms. Election committees manage all local elections in their respective areas, as well as election affairs at the national level (elections to both Houses of the Diet—Representatives and Councillors). Municipal election committees look after the election affairs of governors and councillors in their prefectures.

5. Relations between Governors/Mayors and Councils

Independent of one another and on an equal footing, governors, mayors and elected councils each have their own responsibilities, each providing a check on the other, as follows:

5.1 No-Confidence Votes and Council Dissolution

If a governor or mayor cannot reach a compromise with the council on an issue sharply dividing them, the council can declare a vote of no confidence. To do so, a two-thirds quorum is needed and at least three-quarters of those present must support the motion.

Once this is agreed, as a countermeasure, the governor or mayor is entitled to dissolve the council and call for a local election to resolve the matter. If there is no dissolution order within ten days of the vote of no confidence, the governor or mayor must resign.

However if the council passes a further vote of no confidence at its first meeting subsequent to an election, dissolution is no longer possible and the governor or mayor must step down after being notified of the vote.

5.2 Powers of Veto

Governors and mayors have the right to veto any decision made by the council and demand that it be reconsidered.

5.3 Extraordinary Executive Action

In certain circumstances, governors and mayors are also empowered to make decisions on behalf of the council, either to achieve a compromise, or improve the efficiency of services. Such action is valid even if the council disagrees, but the governor or mayor would remain politically responsible.
6. The Elected Council

Consisting of directly elected councillors, the council is the body that decides the policies of the local authority.

6.1 Organisation

To qualify for election as a councillor, candidates must be Japanese nationals, at least 25 years old, and be on the local electoral roll. Once elected, their term in office is four years (unless the council is dissolved or they retire). Councillors cannot concurrently be members of the Diet, serve as councillors in another area, nor serve as governors, mayors or regular officials, or hold any other job that could interfere with their official responsibilities. They are also banned from being contractor to the authority concerned to ensure fairness of the profession.

Effective January 1, 2003, the system of determining the number of councillors was changed. In the previous system, the number of councillors was fixed by law according to population, but may be reduced by local bylaws. The system was changed in accordance with the amendment of the Local Autonomy Law by the Omnibus Decentralisation Act to the current system, wherein local authorities determine the number of councillors by enacting bylaws, and the maximum number is fixed by law and based on the population of each area.
## Upper Limit of Number of Councillors Allowed (Local Autonomy Law)

### Prefectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Residents</th>
<th>Upper Limit of Number of Councillors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-749,999</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750,000 - 999,999</td>
<td>1 extra councillor is added to 40 for every increment of 50,000 residents above 700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000 -</td>
<td>1 extra councillor is added to 45 for every increment of 700,000 residents above 930,000 (limit: 120)</td>
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</table>

The number for the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is based on the population of the special wards divided by 1 million. The number may be increased by bylaw, but is limited to 130.

### Cities and Towns and Villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Residents</th>
<th>Upper Limit of Number of Councillors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- 1,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>2,000 - 4,999</td>
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<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,500,000 -</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6.2 Powers
The Council has the right to vote on all matters within its jurisdiction, most importantly the right to approve, amend or abolish bylaws, and the right to determine budgets.

Councils also have the power to elect their chairmen and vice-chairmen, as well as to elect members to the election committee.

They have rights to inspect documents on the local authority’s affairs, to demand the governor, mayor or any other executive body to submit reports, to examine the management of the authority’s work and the execution of their resolutions, and to audit the receipts and disbursements of the authority.

They can similarly conduct their own investigation and inspect written records, as well as require the testimony of electors and others concerned.

6.3 Council Proceedings

Governors and mayors are empowered to call council meetings, though a quorum of one-quarter of the council members can demand that an extraordinary meeting be called.

Regular meetings are held at most four times a year (as provided for in local bylaws), and any matter can be discussed there. Extraordinary meetings are held as necessary on the basis of an advance agenda.

Councillors, as well as governors and mayors, have the right to introduce bills, although specific kinds of bills are the prerogative of one side; for example, budget bills are exclusively the responsibility of governors and mayors.

7. Central/Local Relationships

7.1 Outline

Under the principle of the present system of local autonomy, the central government, in its dealings with local authorities, is required to respect their independence, and to limit the exercise of its administrative powers and involvement with local affairs only to cases requiring nation-wide comprehensive policies. Such involvement or intervention must be approved on a case-by-case basis according to the law.
Intervention generally takes three forms: legislative, judicial and administrative.

7.1 (a) Legislative Intervention
The central government may intervene in local authorities’ affairs by legislation enacted by the Diet insofar as it does not contradict the idea of local autonomy stated in the Constitution.

7.1 (b) Judicial Intervention
All lawsuits involving local authority must submit to the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice. Litigation between the central or local government concerning the scope or execution of powers may not be regarded as a lawsuit in the strict sense of the word, but the way is open to submit such disputes to judicial proceedings.

7.1 (c) Administrative Intervention
Administrative intervention is the most common form of central government intervention in local affairs. It can also take the form of quasi-legislative intervention (cabinet orders, ministerial ordinances, etc.), or quasi-judicial intervention (administrative appeals, etc.), but the most frequently used form of intervention is administrative. Administrative intervention can be divided into two types: non-authoritarian (advice, recommendations, notifications, etc.) and authoritarian (permissions, indications, etc.). These types of intervention need to be based on statutes or cabinet order and must give consideration to the autonomy and independence of local authorities.

If a local government has any objections to such an intervention, it can file for a review by the Central-Local Government Dispute Resolution Council.

Issuing passports.
(Tokyo Metropolis)

7.2 Abolition of Delegated Functions

The issue of delegated functions previously could not be overlooked in any explanation of central/local government relationships. Delegated functions were entrusted to the heads of local government authorities as agents of the central government or the upper tier of local government according to statutes. This formed a key part of Japan’s centralized
administrative system. It had long been pointed out that this obscured the location of responsibility and obstructed the establishment of cooperative relations between central and local government.

In accordance with the amendment of the Local Autonomy Law by the Omnibus Decentralisation Act, which took effect in April 2000, delegated functions were abolished and the functions of local government were restructured into self-governing functions and statutory entrusted functions. Related regulations were also established.

7.3 Statutory Entrusted Functions

Statutory entrusted functions are certain previously delegated functions that have been restructured from the standpoints of convenience to the people, operational efficiency, and how best to allocate roles between central and local government.

Statutory entrusted functions are functions handled by local governments based on statutes or cabinet order that should in fact be the responsibility of the central government (or prefectural government), but are entrusted to local governments to ensure their proper handling.

8. Residents’ Right (Direct Participation System)

The systems allowing residents to participate directly in local authority affairs supplement the usual indirect democratic process.

8.1 The Initiative

This is carried out by a specified number of signatories demanding the approval, amendment or abolition of bylaws; special audits; dissolution of the council; and the dismissal of governors, mayors and councillors.

8.1 (a) Bylaws

Direct demands for approval, amendment or abolition of bylaws must be supported by the signatures of at least 1/50th of the electorate. The governor or mayor must call a special meeting of the council within 20 days of receiving such demands and submit the proposed bylaw along with his comments. The final decision rests with the council, which is not bound by the proposal. The direct demand provisions do not apply to local taxes, fees and charges.

8.1 (b) Special Audits

Again, the signatures of a minimum 1/50th of the electorate must accompany a demand for the audit committee to investigate the authority’s financial probity—the audit committee is the authority’s auditing mechanism. Once the committee has finished its audit, it must formally publish the results.

8.1 (c) Dissolution of the Council

One-third of all electors must sign the demand. On receipt the whole electorate is balloted, and a majority vote in favour would result in dissolution.
8.1 (d) Dismissal of Governors, Mayors and Councillors
Again, one-third of all electors must support the demand, and after balloting the electorate, a majority vote in favour would result in dismissal.

This same system also applies to vice governors, deputy mayors, treasurers and chief accountants, election committee members, as well as audit and public safety committee members. In these cases however, the chief executive refers the demand to the council for a decision.

8.2 Other Forms of Direct Participation

8.2 (a) Referenda
The present Constitution allows the enactment of bylaws specific to a particular local authority, but only on the condition that the majority of electors vote in favour.

8.2 (b) Demand for Audit and Suit by Residents
As taxpayers, residents can ask the audit committee to investigate their local authority’s expenditure, its acquisition, management or disposal of property, and relevant officers’ decisions. Depending on the results of such investigation, they can also ask for the appropriate corrective or preventive action to be taken.

If dissatisfied with the results, they have further right to take legal proceedings.

9. Local Authorities’ Legislative Powers

Article 94 of the Constitution guarantees local authorities the right to enact their own legislation. The Local Autonomy Law provides for bylaws and regulations as the types of such legislation.

9.1 Bylaws
All bylaws are subject to a majority vote of the council.

9.1 (a) Scope
Any local authority activities can be the subject of bylaws.

9.1 (b) Efficacy
Since bylaws are part of the country’s legal order together with national laws, and the Constitution provides that, “Local public entities shall have the right to... enact their own bylaws within the law,” any bylaws that violate any provision of the Constitution or other national laws shall be deemed void to the extent of such violation.

Bylaws are local community legislation. They are valid only within the jurisdiction of the local authority concerned, and are not applicable to areas outside of it.

Unless covered by special statutory provisions, local government may not impose any obligation upon citizens or limit their rights except through enactment of bylaws. Bylaws may also contain penal provisions.
9.2 Regulations

Regulations are determined by governors and mayors on issues within their jurisdiction.

9.2 (a) Scope
Any matter that comes under the jurisdiction of governors or mayors, including self-governing functions and statutory entrusted functions, is within the scope of their regulatory authority.

9.2 (b) Efficacy
Governors and mayors may enact their own regulations as long as they are not in violation of national laws. As with bylaws, regulations are subordinate to national laws in terms of their validity. Similarly, the scope of their validity is limited to the area under the jurisdiction of the local authority concerned. Should bylaws and regulations conflict, bylaws shall take precedence.

In addition, boards of education and other local administrative committees can enact regulations on matters under their respective jurisdiction in accordance with the law.

10. Local Government Finance

Local authorities are empowered to manage their own financial affairs, and sources of revenue are guaranteed in a number of ways.

The major revenue sources for local government consist of local taxes, local allocation tax, government grants, and local loans.

10.1 Local Public Finance Program

Article 7 of the Local Allocation Tax Law requires local authority estimates (income and expenditure) to be determined by the cabinet, submitted to the Diet and subsequently published.

The program allows for verification that the local authority revenues will be sufficient to provide a given level of service, as well as meet legal obligations. The process involves totalling all local authority income and expenditure; if revenue is insufficient, the central government may consider amendments to the local tax system, increase the local allocation tax, or take other action.

The program also helps local authorities match their economic and fiscal policies with those of the central government and acts as a guideline for fiscal management.

10.2 Financial Structure of Local Government (2002/03)

The figures below show the structure of local government revenue and expenditure, totalled for all local authorities.
10.3 Local Taxes

Local authorities are able to levy and collect local taxes under the provisions of the Local Tax Law. Local taxes in Japan have many components as shown in the accompanying chart.

A local consumption tax was introduced in April 1997, and the total amount of revenue from this is accounted for as prefectural revenue.

Local taxes account for approximately 42.1% of the country’s total tax revenues. Prefectural taxes make up 30.2% of total prefecture revenues, while the municipalities represent 34.4%. (All figures are based on 2002 statistics.)

10.4 Local Allocation Tax
The local allocation tax allows the central government to balance local authority revenues and guarantee a standard level of service. The system provides for certain percentages (specified by law) of national tax revenues to be set aside as a common revenue source for local authorities, to be allocated to each authority in amounts determined by specific calculation. In this way, tax revenues may be reallocated from more affluent authorities such as big cities to those with depopulated areas. The system rectifies inequity of financial capability among local authorities caused by uneven distribution of tax revenue sources.

The total local allocation tax available in any one year is tied to national tax revenues, and is a more stable form of income than other sources of subsidy. It has the additional benefit of being treated as part of local authorities’ independent sources of income, and no restrictions are put on its use.

10.4 (a) Composition and Types of Local Allocation Tax
As mentioned earlier, the total amount of local allocation tax is linked to certain percentages of national tax revenues: more specifically, 32% each of income tax, corporation tax and liquor tax revenues, 29.5% of consumption tax and 25% of tobacco consumption tax revenues (Article 6 of the Local Allocation Tax Law). In reality, the amount does not always agree with the amount obtained by specified percentages of national tax revenues. When local revenue sources are expected to be insufficient through yearly formulation of a local finance plan, the central government may borrow to fund the local allocation tax, bring forward tax allocations, or increase/decrease the total amount of the tax.

Of the annual total set aside for local allocation tax, 94% is distributed to level out the differences in individual financial capability as described earlier; the remaining 6% is set aside for extraordinary cases such as natural disasters.

10.4 (b) Calculation of the Local Allocation Tax
The amount of ordinary allocation is in principle the difference between an authority’s basic fiscal needs and its basic fiscal revenues (revenue shortfall), as determined by a fixed formula (stipulated by law or cabinet order). In order to make a rational assumption, an authority’s basic fiscal needs are determined, based on specific calculation of each service item. Each local finance plan forms the concrete basis for estimating the level of such needs. Therefore, some authorities with more revenues than needs, Tokyo for example, are not eligible for the local allocation tax.

The calculation uses a model prefecture with a population of 1.7 million and a model municipality with 100,000 as the standard authorities; corrections are then made for population, area and regional characteristics. To calculate income, a percentage is set of the estimated total income each authority is likely to receive, based primarily on past annual receipts. The percentages, 80% for prefectures and 75% for municipalities, are used because any prediction of need cannot reflect the various authorities’ individual circumstances. Just as importantly, if a 100% figure were used it would take away from local authorities all freedom of choice in how they spend the money, and discourage them from building reserves (which would automatically be lost in the coming year’s calculation).

When the aggregate revenue shortfalls of individual authorities as determined by the foregoing method does not match the total amount of the ordinary local allocation tax, the two figures are brought in line by multiplying an adjustment rate to each authority’s revenue shortfall.

In the case of the special allocation tax, in accordance with a Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications ordinance, it is distributed to each authority whose revenue shortfall has not been tracked, according to basic fiscal needs.
10.5 Local Bonds

The Local Finance Law provides, as its basic principle, that local authorities should use revenues other than that from local bonds to finance their expenditures, but the Law permits them to issue bonds to finance capital expenditures such as construction of public facilities and to cover the expenses of public enterprises (Article 5 of the Local Finance Law).

Prefectures must obtain Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications approval, and municipalities that of the prefecture, prior to the issuing. In this way local bonds are treated almost like government-guaranteed bonds. The less affluent local authorities benefit as a result, as they can raise large amounts of finance at low rates of interest, as well as provide themselves with a source of non-earmarked capital finance (since a proportion of the relevant debt charges can be included in the coming years’ total expenditure needs).

In accordance with the Omnibus Decentralisation Act that took effect in April 2000, starting in April 2005, the issuance of local bonds will change from the current system in which central government permission is required to a local consensus System.

10.6 Other Sources of Revenue

There are national government disbursements and a local transfer tax other than those mentioned above.

There are three types of national government disbursements: national treasury obligatory shares, grants-in-aid and payment for agential tasks. National treasury obligatory shares are payable for undertakings that are carried out under the joint responsibility of the central and local government. The central government, one of the responsible parties, pays obligatory shares to a local government, the executor of the undertakings (e.g., expenses for compulsory education). National treasury grants-in-aid are distributed as subsidies for local undertakings (e.g., improvement of sewerage systems). National treasury payment for agential tasks are concerned with undertakings which are in fact the responsibility of the central government, but are entrusted to local authorities for convenience and efficiency (e.g., election expenses for Diet members).

All of the above are specific and cannot be used for any other purpose. There have been discussions lately about the need to relax control—including the minimum standards laid down by the government concerning the type and manner of construction of public facilities—and to consider making grants-in-aid a more general source of revenue.

There is also the local transfer tax. This was originally a direct source of income for all local authorities, but for greater convenience collection was subsequently arranged nationally for redistribution to local government on an objective basis, for example by road area and length. The local transfer tax falls somewhere between local taxes and the local allocation tax, and a typical example is the local road tax on fuels such as petrol, which is collected by the central government and later returned to prefectures and municipalities as the local road transfer tax.

11. Local Government Personnel

Local government personnel are classified either as “special” or “regular.” Directly elected governors, mayors and councillors, as well as members of boards of education and other administrative committees, together with temporary or
part-time advisers, researchers and so on, are “special.” The Local Government Personnel Law, which defines the status of local government officers, does not apply to any of the above.

Others are classified as “regular” staff to whom the Local Government Personnel Law is applied.

Unless provided for by the law, local authorities are duty bound to introduce bylaws covering all personnel matters, based on the provisions of the Personnel Law.

11.1 Responsibility for Personnel Matters

The main responsibility for appointing local government staff rests with governors and mayors, council chairmen, members of boards of education and other administrative committees, prefectural chiefs of police and municipal fire chiefs. Their responsibilities cover initial appointments, allowing time off for ill-health, suspensions, dismissals and disciplinary actions, as set out in statutes, bylaws and regulations.

Prefectures, designated cities, special wards and some cities with populations of 150,000 and over have personnel committees; the remaining municipalities have equity committees; both types of committees are independent of the employers and have been instituted primarily to improve working conditions and hear employees’ complaints.

Both committees advise employers on personnel management, and in most cases give guidance on annual salary increases—which when approved require bylaws to be amended and salaries revised. This advice often coincides with that given by the Civil Service Personnel Authority in the case of the central government.

11.2 Appointments and Promotions

Local government staff appointments are based on competitive examinations in all local authorities with personnel committees; appointments may be made by other means if the committee permits, or in municipalities with an equity committee.

Generally speaking, most local government officers are employed on the principle of lifetime employment. Equal opportunity is established in statutes, and discrimination based on race, gender, religion or social status is prohibited. This also applies to political opinions, excluding cases where the person in question has formed, or is a member of, an organisation advocating destruction of the Constitution, or the government established under it, by means of violence. The principle of equal opportunity applies only to Japanese nationals; it is widely held as inappropriate for foreign nationals to exercise authority or have the power to make decisions in local government. Recently, therefore, some local authorities have allowed the appointment of foreign nationals to positions that do not exercise authority or do not have public decision-making power.

11.3 Welfare, Mutual Aid and Personal Injury Funds

Local authorities are obliged to make provisions for employee welfare, including leisure and recreation activities, medical checks, housing and convalescent care. A large proportion of staff housing is funded and built by local authorities and provided at low rents.
An employee mutual aid system provides financial benefits to staff and their families in the event of sickness, injury or death; mutual aid associations are responsible for the administration. Full-time officers (both ordinary and special) automatically become formal members of a certain association upon appointment according to the nature of their work and the type and location of the local authority.

Benefits can be roughly divided into short- and long-term: short-term benefits are primarily medical expenses covering employees and their dependents. For an employee, 70% of the costs of regular medical treatment are covered. Long-term benefits are pensions payable to employees or next-of-kin on retirement, or in the event of disability or death. The local authorities meet 50% of the costs for both, and the other 50% is covered by members’ premiums which are automatically deducted from salaries.

If employees are injured or killed while carrying out their official duties, local authorities are obliged to pay compensation for any loss incurred.

The details and levels of compensation are fixed by law and benefits are paid by the Local Government Employee Personal Injury Fund, the local government’s mutual aid organisation which provides uniform compensation. The personal injury fund is financed by local authorities based on the total amount of salary paid to each different kind of work.

11.4 Rights and Obligations of Local Government Employees

Local government officers are obliged to follow lawful and official instructions, respect confidentiality and make a full commitment to their jobs. They are also prohibited from doing anything that would lead to a loss of trust.

Certain restrictions on political activities apply in the interests of political neutrality; for example, they cannot be involved in setting up political organisations, hold executive positions in such organisations, nor take part in local election activities. They cannot run as candidates for the Diet, or hold office as governor, mayor or councillor while employed by a local authority.

The Local Government Personnel Law restricts some or all of the basic rights of employment for local government employees according to their duties, including the right to organise, to participate in collective bargaining, and to conduct labour strikes—all of which are guaranteed to other workers under the Constitution.

These prohibitions are based on the principle that local government employees are public servants, and that such restrictions are in the interests of public welfare. The Supreme Court has ruled in favour of such restrictions.

Regarding disputes, any local government employee found guilty of conspiracy or incitement is liable to imprisonment for a maximum of three years or a fine not exceeding 100,000 yen.

Police and fire service employees are prohibited from organising and collective bargaining; other employees retain this right, although local public enterprise employees and those engaged in routine work join staff organisations rather than trade unions, and cannot conclude collective agreements.

Although restricted by the above, employees are able to maintain and improve working conditions via personnel committees. The Local Government Personnel Law gives staff the right to request the committee or its equivalent to act on their behalf regarding salaries, working hours and related matters. After investigation, and if it accepts the employee’s proposal, the committee can make recommendations to the local authority. Such advice is not legally binding, but the local authority remains morally as well as politically responsible for whatever action it takes.
Any disciplinary action which is seen by an employee as unfair can be reported to the personnel or equity committee, which examines the complaint, and if it finds it unjustified, the committee can cancel or correct the action taken by issuing instructions to the authority.

11.5 Staff Assignment and Exchange

In recent years there have been active programs of personnel exchange between local authorities and with the central government. Local authority employees are commonly assigned for a time to the central government or another local authority for training purposes; equally often, in the case of highly experienced staff, these exchanges take the form of retiring from local government and being re-employed at the central government or a different local authority.

Likewise, central government officials are sent to local authorities, where they help build closer relationships between the central and local government, or between local authorities.

Local governments also dispatch employees to foreign governments or foreign local governments (mostly in their sister-city counterparts), or to international organisations, and special legislation has been enacted to cover such employees.
Local government employee Overseas Study Assistance Program.
The Recent Trend in Local Autonomy

1. Tide of Decentralisation

1.1 Background

There have been many proposals to promote decentralisation since the Shoup Recommendation of 1949. Particularly in recent years, there have been strong demands to cope with the changing international community and the ageing society, and to correct the uni-polar concentration in Tokyo while building local communities with individual character. There have been demands voiced for the thorough reexamination of the existing centralised government system, and the creation of a decentralised society where people can truly experience comfort and prosperity.

1.2 Advances in Administrative Decentralisation

In face of the need to develop dynamic, unique regional societies where citizens are able to live comfortable, affluent lives, the role of the local government continues to grow as the comprehensive administrative entity in the region. At the same time, however, it must respond to the socioeconomic changes of globalisation, demographic changes of a declining population and birthrate and the aging of society, and advances in the IT revolution as well as the diverse needs of the people.

To respond to the needs of the people, administrative decentralisation, founded on the conviction that local government services should be handled closer to the people in their local communities, has become an important issue. For this purpose, the Decentralisation Promotion Law, aimed at promoting systematic and general advances in government decentralisation, was legislated in May 1995. The Decentralisation Promotion Committee, formed under the Law, examined specific guidelines in developing a decentralisation plan and submitted five recommendations over a period of time, including the abolition of the delegated administrative service system, to the Prime Minister.

On the national government level, the Decentralisation Promotion Plan was adopted with Cabinet approval, and the Omnibus Decentralisation Act was adopted in July 16, 1999. The Act marked the transition from the centralised government administration system that was developed in the Meiji Period to a decentralised scheme and holds great significance in promoting the transfer of power to local governments. The Act was enacted in April 2000, and the promotion of decentralisation is entering full-scale implementation.

1.3 Basic Principles and Anticipated Effects of Government Decentralisation

The basic principles of decentralisation are, according to Article 2 of the Decentralisation Promotion Law, to define clearly “the roles to be fulfilled by the national and local governments,” increase “the autonomy and independence of local governments,” and develop “dynamic, unique regional societies.”

The effects anticipated from switching to a decentralised administrative system include the development of a decentralised society. The realisation of such a system signifies the transition from a master-servant relationship among
national, prefectural, and municipal governments to one based on equality and cooperation and a transition from a uniform, vertically structured administrative system under the leadership of the central government to a general and distinctive administrative system led by the people.

1.4 Description of Decentralisation Reform

Major points of the decentralisation reform under enforcement of the Omnibus Decentralisation Act are the following.

i) Clarification of the respective roles of central and local government
   The central government should assume responsibility primarily for international affairs and matters in which nation-wide unified decision-making is desirable, while the administration of affairs close to the people should, to the extent possible, be entrusted to local government.

ii) Abolition of the system of delegated functions
   In order to build a new equal and cooperative relationship between central and local government, the system of delegated functions will be abolished and the functions of local government will be restructured into self-governing functions and statutory entrusted functions. Accordingly, the local administrative officials system (a system for handling public employees who are temporarily assigned as national government employees to work in administration of specific delegated functions) shall be abolished.

iii) Re-examination of central government participation
   The Local Autonomy Law establishes the basic principles for participation, the basic types of participation for new administrative categories, the procedures for participation, and the procedures for handling disputes concerning such participation. Participation pertaining to Individual Laws is kept to a bare minimum in line with the basic types.

iv) Promotion of the delegation of authority
   Central government authority is transferred to prefectures, and prefectural authority is transferred to cities, towns, and villages in accordance with the amendment of the Individual Laws. In conjunction with this, the special case city system was established in accordance with the amendment of the Local Autonomy Law. (Refer to 2(2) Special Case Cities)

v) Curbing regulatory obligations
   Out of respect for the self-organising rights of local governments and to promote more rational and effective administration, the system wherein central government regulations impose obligations on local government to establish organisations or employment shall be abolished or relaxed in accordance with the amendment of the Individual Laws.

vi) Establish local government administrative systems
   Promote voluntary mergers of municipalities, revitalize local assemblies, and ease the requirements for core cities (Refer to 2(1) Core Cities) in order to improve the administrative and financial capabilities of local government and establish local administrative systems.

2. Improvement of the Local Administrative Structure
As the trend towards decentralisation continues, the public has become aware of the need to address the task of improving the structure of local government, the driving force behind decentralisation. A series of changes in the system have been made towards strengthening the administrative and financial capabilities of local authorities. On their part, the local authorities are stepping up their own efforts to improve their administrative structures.

2.1 Core Cities

The Core City System was introduced by a partial amendment to the Local Autonomy Law in June 1994. The system was designed to give stronger authority to larger cities which, in reality, are functioning as the core of their respective regions. Its purpose is to provide government services at a level as close to the residents as possible.

The qualifications for becoming a core city are to have a population of at least 300,000 but less than 500,000, land area of at least 100 sq km. Core cities are designated by a cabinet order upon application from qualified cities.

Core cities may undertake all the functions delegated to the designated cities as prescribed by cabinet order with the exception of those which are more efficient if collectively handled by prefectures. Examples of such functions include: granting permission to operate and overseeing nursing homes for the elderly; granting permission for development projects within an urbanisation promotion area or urbanisation control area; and granting permission to install, and carrying out on-the-spot inspections of, general-waste treatment facilities. The core cities are required to set up public health centres and carry out functions delegated to the executive heads of the municipalities that set up the public health centres.

After the system was instituted, Utsunomiya City, Niigata City and 10 other cities became core cities on April 1, 1996; followed by five more cities, including Akita City and Koriyama City on April 1, 1997; and again by Toyota City, Fukuyama City and two other cities on April 1, 1998; Iwaki City, Nagano City and two other cities on April 1, 1999; Asahikawa City and Matsuyama City on April 1, 2000; Yokosuka City on April 1, 2001; Nara City and Kurashiki City on April 1, 2002; and six other cities, including Kawagoe City and Funabashi City, on April 1, 2003 for a total of 35 cities (this total decreased by 1 when Shizuoka City and Shimizu City merged on April 1, 2003).

2.2 Special Case Cities

The Special Case City System was introduced on April 1, 2000 in accordance with the amendment of the Local Autonomy Law by the enactment of the Omnibus Decentralisation Act. This system is intended to promote the conveyance of authority to cities, towns, and villages. Cities must have a population of at least 200,000 to qualify, and qualified cities are designated as special cities by cabinet order upon application. Special case cities may undertake all the functions delegated to core cities with the exception of those that may be more efficiently handled in an integrated manner by prefectures. One example would be granting permission for development projects. As of April 1, 2004, there are 40 special cities.

2.3 Wide-Area Union System

The Wide-Area Union System was introduced by the same partial amendment to the Local Autonomy Law that introduced the Core City System. The system is intended for local authorities to deal appropriately and efficiently with the diversifying demand for wide-area services, and to improve their preparedness for more authority to be transferred from the central government.
A wide-area union may be created by ordinary local government units and special wards that have agreed upon a set of operational rules, for joint management of affairs that are more efficient or appropriate if handled in an integrated manner over a wide region. A union including a prefecture in its membership requires the approval of the Minister of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, and one that does not, the approval of prefectural governors.

Wide-area unions may be considered a kind of union of local authorities, but unlike partial unions, unions with prefectural membership can accept delegation of authority or functions directly from the State, and the others from prefectures. They can also demand delegation of powers and functions to the State or prefectures, as applicable, for increasing effectiveness of the power transfer. The system is designed to reflect the will and desires of the residents: assembly members and executive heads of wide-area unions can be elected only by direct or indirect elections; and as is the case in ordinary local government units, residents are entitled to make direct demands to the unions.

The first wide-area union was formed in April 1996 from eight towns and villages in Ono County, Oita Prefecture, and a total of 79 wide-area unions have been established as of June 2002.

2.4 Municipal Merger Law

The 1965 Law for Exceptional Measures on Municipal Mergers provides for exceptional measures to be applied to associated laws to facilitate the voluntary merger of municipalities. It was granted 10-year extensions in 1975, 1985, and 1995, and its current expiration date is March 31, 2005.

Required amendments were made in 1999 based on the Decentralisation Promotion Plan. The expiration date remains the same.

The Municipal Merger Law has a provision for declaring the intent to promote voluntary municipal mergers. Unlike the so-called “merger rush of the Showa era” in the 1950s, when the nation or prefectures took the lead and promoted mergers (municipalities reduced their numbers by about two-thirds, from 9,868 in 1953 when the Municipal Merger Promotion Law was enacted, to 3,975 in 1956 when the law expired), this provision intends to create a favourable environment for promoting municipal mergers with respect for municipal initiatives as a premise. In line with the provision, a wide range of extraordinary measures were systemised for the benefit of merged municipalities.

To ensure that merged municipalities would not be disadvantaged by mergers, fiscal measures such as the extension of the grace period before recalculation of the ordinary local allocation tax for merged municipalities, and development loans for extraordinarily depopulated areas are stipulated. There are also provisions on special consideration for issuing local government bonds to finance costs of city planning after merger.

Other measures to facilitate municipal mergers include special treatment of the term and number of local assembly members, the electoral districts of prefectural assembly members, and the requirements to become a city.

Moreover, a residents’ initiative system was created. With the signatures of at least 1/50th of the local electorate, residents can demand the organisation of a merger conference, allowing them direct participation in the merger process. The merger conference is a conference based on the Local Autonomy Law and organised by municipalities intending to merge. It is a forum for discussing conditions for merger including the propriety of the merger itself. It was held in every merger case conducted under the Municipal Merger Law.
As of June 24, 2002, a total of 136 residents’ initiatives have been presented in 83 regions. Of these, 16 regions have led to the establishment of a merger conference. On April 1, 2002, Gushiken Village and Nakazato Village in Okinawa Prefecture merged to become Kumejima Town, the first merger under this system in the country.

2.5 Efforts at Administrative Reform

To deal with progress in decentralisation, local authorities need to establish simple and efficient administrative systems in support. In addition, local governments are now under extremely severe financial conditions, with local government debt now expected to total about 193 trillion yen by the end of fiscal 2002, and the combined central and local government debt projected to reach about 698 trillion yen (excluding overlapping amounts in the Special Account for Local Allocation Tax). In this situation, the nation has high expectations for local authorities to undertake the radical fiscal and administrative reforms that are so urgently needed.

Under such circumstances, based on their general plans for administrative reform, which take into account the opinion of residents, the individual local authorities have been making wide-ranging efforts such as re-examining their work, reviewing their organisational structure, rationalising the number of staff and wages, and encouraging the skills development and enhanced awareness of their staff.
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| Total     | 126,824,166     | 376,788.90      | 695          | 2,405                    |

*1 Parentheses ( ) indicate total land area of Japan including Lake Towada, in which the boundary between Aomori and Akita Prefectures is not defined.  
*2 Indicates the 23 wards in Tokyo. This number is not included in the total number of cities.  
*3 Parentheses ( ) indicate the adjusted figure if the six villages in the Northern Territories (Kuril Islands) are included.  

April 2004
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<td>4 Prefectures, Prefectural Capitals, and Number of Municipalities by Prefecture</td>
<td>Ibid.</td>
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<td>21 Population in the Three Main Urban Areas</td>
<td>New Political Economy, Shimizu-shoin</td>
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<td>28 Present Education System</td>
<td>An Introduction to Local Administration in Japan, 1990, CLAIR</td>
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<td>Local Autonomy Law, Ryosho-Fukyu Kai, as reference materials</td>
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<td>44 Tokyo’s City/Ward System</td>
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<td>Local Autonomy Law, Ryosho-Fukyu Kai, p110</td>
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<td>48 Upper Limit of Number of Councillors Allowed (Local Autonomy Law)</td>
<td>The Laws and Regulations of Japan, Gyosei, as reference materials</td>
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<td>53 Budgets of Local Authorities (2002/03)</td>
<td>Local Finances White Paper 2002, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications</td>
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### Appendices

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<td>67 Area and Population of Designated Cities, Prefectural Capitals and Core Cities</td>
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