

## Chapter 6

# Notable Initiatives by Local Communities

## 1 SDGs from the Perspective of Local Communities

This section presents case studies that demonstrate different ways in which the ideas and aims of the SDGs are being implemented in local communities. The nature of activities in each case varies widely. Some companies and organizations identify specific areas and objectives within the SDG, while others work on outreach activities for companies and organizations that are interested in the SDGs but have difficulty engaging with them. In addition, many public organizations, companies, and NPOs are conducting activities that correspond to issues covered by the SDGs, even if they are not tied to specific goals.

Thanks to more opportunities to learn about the SDGs in schools, as well as more initiatives by governments, corporations, and nonprofit organizations, awareness of the SDGs is spreading at an ever-increasing pace. Resident-led lifelong learning groups and training sessions by company labor unions are helping people think about the future direction of their lives and businesses. However, while the general public has developed an interest in the SDGs, it is not always clear to people what action they can take to resolve social issues. There may be many companies in regional communities that have encountered the SDGs, but are still looking for information on ways to engage with the SDGs and on how to relate their business to solving social issues.

The Japan Business Federation (*Keidanren*) has published a collection of case studies titled “Innovation for SDGs: Road to Society 5.0,” providing examples of initiatives such as BOP (base of the pyramid) businesses serving developing countries and the development of large-scale social systems that provide health care closely linked to people’s everyday lives. In rural areas, it is small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that form the heart of the local economy, and it is difficult for them to consider

the same kind of initiatives that large corporations engage in. That said, local governments, companies, and NPOs are starting to combine their efforts to address local issues and achieve the SDGs.

In rural areas, there are major challenges not only for the growth and sustainability of companies, but also for the sustainability of the local communities that stand behind them. A particularly important question is how to train the personnel who will be responsible for the future of these communities. In communities along the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region, the issue of human resource development came into sharper focus during the process of recovery from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Many children struggle with a lack of places to play and share experiences together, non-attendance at school, social withdrawal, bullying, abuse, and other problems relating to social systems and ethics. The number of government agencies and public support personnel who deal with these important issues is limited, and many children fall through the gaps in terms of service provision. Furthermore, with feelings of confinement permeating society, an increasing number of young people are struggling to find their way in life. Public education at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels alone is not sufficient to develop human resources.

This chapter will look at local approaches to the SDGs by providing examples of SDG initiatives by local authorities, private companies, and NPOs, particularly from areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Tohoku region.

## 2 Local Government Initiatives

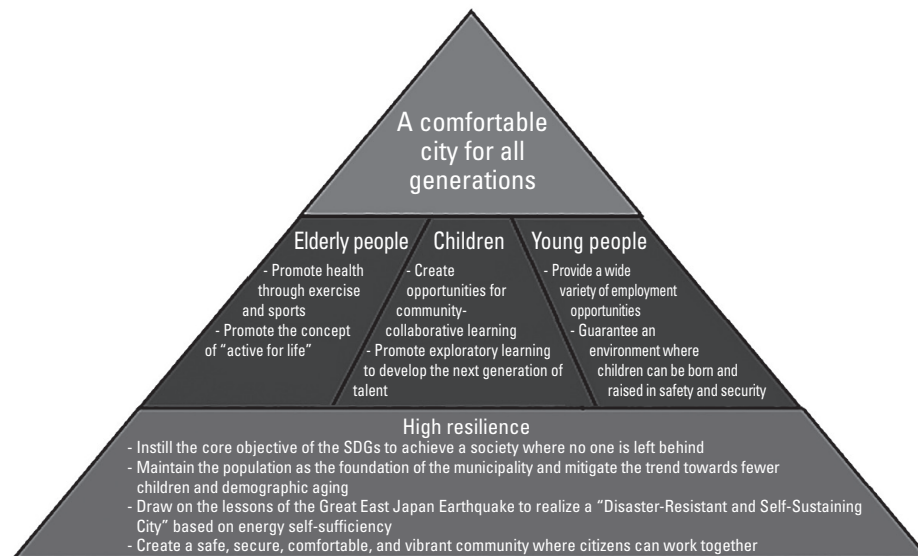
Local governments are confronted with various issues affecting their communities on a daily basis. In response, they draw up “Comprehensive Plans” which are used as the basis for developing policies, programs, and projects. While there is an inherent compatibility between these plans and the SDGs, setting out clearer goals and indica-

tors makes it possible to explain how particular projects contribute to solving global issues.

While the Cabinet Office's *Comprehensive Strategy for the Revitalization of Communities, People and Jobs* for 2016 mentions the SDGs only once, the SDGs are discussed throughout the 2017 report. The inclusion of the SDGs in subsequent reports has further reinforced their relationship with local development. What lies behind this is the "Future City" initiative.<sup>1</sup> In FY2008 the government selected "Eco-Model Cities," from which the Future Cities were subsequently selected. Looking at the key performance indicators (KPIs) set out in the "SDGs Future City" Initiative, regional revitalization and efforts to achieve the SDGs require not only the decarbonization of individual regions, but also efforts to optimize overall policy strategies and the faster resolution of local issues. Circular economy and environmental policy perspectives are also reflected in such areas as applications of advanced digital technologies, the establishment of smart cities, and the formation of "Regional Circular and Ecological Spheres."<sup>2</sup>

**Higashi-Matsushima:** Of the initial 29 municipalities selected for the Future City Initiative launched in FY2018, Higashi-Matsushima City was the only one located in Miyagi Prefecture. This was one of the communities that suffered severe damage from the Great East Japan Earthquake. It has set out a vision for earthquake reconstruction and the natural environment, undertaking projects such as the "Smart Disaster Prevention Eco-Town." By linking these to the SDGs, Higashi-Matsushima has become a model city that is moving forward with plans to manage the economy, environment, and society in a sustainable way. As shown in **Figure 6-1**, the six priority issues include: attracting companies and designing employment measures for the elderly oriented to lifelong work (Economy); promoting citizen participation in local activities to foster collaborative community development, and improving the education system with a focus on community schools within all elementary and junior high schools (Society); and achieving high levels of resilience through parallel efforts on the environment and disaster recovery (Environment).

❖ **Figure 6-1: Higashi-Matsushima City's Comprehensive Plan and SDGs**



Source: Higashi-Matsushima City, *Higashi-Matsushima City SDGs Future City Plan (2021–2023)* (2021)

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see <https://future-city.go.jp/en/about/>.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of "Regional Circular and Ecological Spheres" proposed by the Ministry of Environment promotes the idea of developing regional resources by building networks composed of natural connections (connections among forests, the countryside, rivers, and the sea) and economic connections (human resources, funds, and others). For more information, see <https://www.env.go.jp/content/900457435.pdf>.

However, Miyagi Prefecture ranks 45th out of 47 in the prefectural Human Security Indicators in *SDGs and Japan*, and Higashi-Matsushima has a low Overall Index in the Miyagi Model, ranking 23rd out of 35 municipalities. Indicators related to dignity and gender, such as places for children to spend time outside of school and women in municipal managerial positions, were especially low (both 34th). This suggests the need for more practical measures.

Higashi-Matsushima City posts initiatives for each year on its website. Lectures and workshops are held for elementary, junior high, and high schools, as well as residents and businesses, reflecting the municipal government's efforts to raise awareness among both children and adults. It is hoped that fostering citizens' awareness of the issues will lead to widespread progress in achieving the goals and targets set for 2030 with respect to the six priority issues described above. Further discussions are needed to translate this into action focused on the dignity of women and children.

### 3 Corporate Initiatives

#### (1) Role of the Media — The Case of Yamagata Prefecture

The media plays a major role in communicating information to the general public. Numerous broadcasters and newspapers across the country, in both urban and rural areas, have declared their participation in the SDG Media Compact. In Yamagata Prefecture, which has the highest Human Security Index in the Tohoku region, the media is actively trying to raise awareness among residents. Yamagata Television (YTS) is taking advantage of its broadcasting business to promote initiatives related to poverty, education, and energy in the region. With local university students from Yamagata University, Tohoku University of Art & Design, and other institutions acting as interviewers, SDG-related activities being undertaken by companies in the prefecture are presented in a weekly two-minute program called “Yamagata SDGs Mirai Lab,” which provides an opportunity to think about the future. Meanwhile, Yamagata Broadcasting Company (YBC) is working to bring the world and the region together through radio programs that explain corporate initiatives on the SDGs from the perspectives of the environment, society, economy, and partnerships. In addition, the program presents initiatives that individuals

can do in their daily lives to contribute to the SDGs (Yamagata TV, “Yamagata SDGs Mirai Lab” <https://www.yts.co.jp/sdgs/mirailab/>) (in Japanese).

In August 2020, the *Yamagata Shimbun* (newspaper), Yamagata University, and the Yamagata Prefectural Government agreed to commit to the SDGs with a set of joint guidelines for action and practice. One such initiative is a long-running series of articles titled “The Compass of Happiness — SDGs and the Future of the Region,” which is available to prefectural residents ([https://www.yamagata-np.jp/feature/sdgs\\_rashinban/](https://www.yamagata-np.jp/feature/sdgs_rashinban/)) (in Japanese). It aims to reflect on sustainable community development, looking not only at the activities of companies working to reduce waste and create a recycling-oriented society, but also at educational projects for the healthy development of children and students, as well as ways to support students and citizens who have fallen into poverty as a result of measures to prevent COVID-19. Whether on TV or in print, most coverage focuses on activities involving young people, such as regional revitalization initiatives that draw on school learning; ways to build communities amid the shrinking labor force caused by fewer children and an aging population; and efforts by companies to reduce their impact on the environment. However, there is currently limited coverage of issues from perspectives such as gender or human rights.

#### (2) Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

While activities aimed at raising awareness through the media have increased, these tend to focus on larger companies. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the trends among SMEs, which make up the majority of regional economies. In fact, many businesses don't know how to address this as part of their corporate activities, indicating a need for training, workshops, and consulting services.

However, some people are providing support for local businesses, such as Hiromi Konta of CSR Integration (based in Tendo City, Yamagata Prefecture). In an interview (October 27, 2021), Mr. Konta emphasized the need to give companies tips on how they can address the SDGs in their business activities, particularly in the Tohoku region. Dialogues with companies revealed that one possible method is to “backcast” from beyond the 169 targets of the SDGs to identify what companies can do, and then pursue initiatives towards this end. The interview also highlighted structural challenges at local companies arising from perceptions of

social roles and established practices, and suggested that important factors for achieving SDGs include not only the environment, innovation, and partnerships, but also gender and job satisfaction.

Resolving social issues such as gender and job satisfaction remains a significant challenge because of the difficulty in measuring effects, because these issues relate to personnel policies, and also because the low personnel mobility in SMEs leads to systems becoming ossified. As such, it will be necessary to outline specific actions to be taken, while showing that taking social issues into account can still contribute to business growth.

### (3) Company Certification System — An Example from Miyagi Prefecture

To provide better incentives for creating comfortable workplaces and promoting work-life balance, Miyagi Prefecture has established a certification system for “Companies that Harness the Power of Women.” As a further economic incentive, this certification will be added to the assessment criteria used in the comprehensive bidding evaluation system for construction work and construction-related services from April 2020. Some 484 companies that have their headquarters, main office, or a base of operations in Miyagi Prefecture and that conduct business activities in the prefecture have been certified (as of November 1, 2021). Of these, 35 have been certified as “gold companies.” Although details of initiatives are given on company websites, only some show specific systems, while others only mention policies, indicating that there is some way to go before company efforts are fully developed.

## 4 NPO Initiatives

### (1) Examples from Miyagi Prefecture

Data on children’s living environments and situations show that standards in Miyagi Prefecture compare poorly to those found in the rest of Japan. Serious problems include those related to children’s mental health, such as non-attendance at school and the number of consultations at Child Welfare Centers. Meanwhile, there are not enough school counselors and school social workers to address these issues on the ground.

A number of NPOs working with children are active in Miyagi Prefecture. A search of the Miyagi NPO Information Net, operated by Miyagi NPO Plaza (an NPO support facility in Miyagi Prefecture), revealed 125 organizations whose main fields of activity are “children,” “youth” or “education and learning support.” With the enactment of the Act on the Promotion of Policy on Child Poverty in 2013, various initiatives to improve environments for children now include collaboration with NPOs, while government-contracted programs provide “free schools”<sup>3</sup> and places for learning support. In addition, many activities are supported by the public, in the form of donations from citizens and companies, volunteering, and private grants. The work of several such organizations are highlighted here.

### (2) NPO TEDIC (<https://www.tedic.jp>)

TEDIC works mainly in Ishinomaki City. Established in May 2011 in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake, the organization is dedicated to supporting children and young people in difficult circumstances, such as poverty, abuse, neglect, non-attendance at school, and social withdrawal. TEDIC was set up by a young man from the local area, and its activities have continued with the support and participation of many people from Sendai City and outside the prefecture. Today, it is run by co-chairs Taira Suzuki and Kenya Otsu, who came from outside the region to ensure that its work will keep going. Ten years have passed since the disaster, but support for children and young people is still required, even now under “normal circumstances.” For example, the group offers children who are not attending school, or whose family members have left for work and who have no one to spend the evening with, a place to spend time (Figure 6-2). In an interview (November 8, 2021), Taira Suzuki pointed out that providing these services will not solve the problem, and that the underlying issues in society still need to be addressed. The challenges facing children and young people are largely a matter of social structures, and the situation will not improve without, for example, the elimination of silos in the public institutions which they look to for support, as well as stronger cooperation between local agencies and organizations. Today, the environment that surrounds children and young people is coming under scrutiny, and

<sup>3</sup> “Free schools” are private educational facilities that may provide educational opportunities, counseling, and a place to spend time to children who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not want to go to school.



Figure 6-2: Initiatives under the Ishinomaki City learning and life support project (courtesy of TEDIC)



it is essential to have a safety net built by residents of all ages, rather than only relying on the efforts of NPOs and volunteers. To create such an environment, it is also vital to enhance frameworks in which a wide range of stakeholders, including all generations and genders, can participate, express their views, and be involved in decision-making.

Since 2018, TEDIC has been commissioned by Miyagi Prefecture to operate the Ishinomaki Zone Comprehensive Consultation Center for Children and Young People. It offers one-stop services for children and young people (aged up to around 30) in Ishinomaki, Higashi-Matsushima, and Onagawa, for advice regarding the difficulties of everyday life, such as non-attendance at school, social withdrawal, and being outside education, employment, or training (Figure 6-2). It is hoped that it will provide seamless and comprehensive support for facilitating access to a wide range of official services, as well as referrals to the services of NPOs and other private organizations.

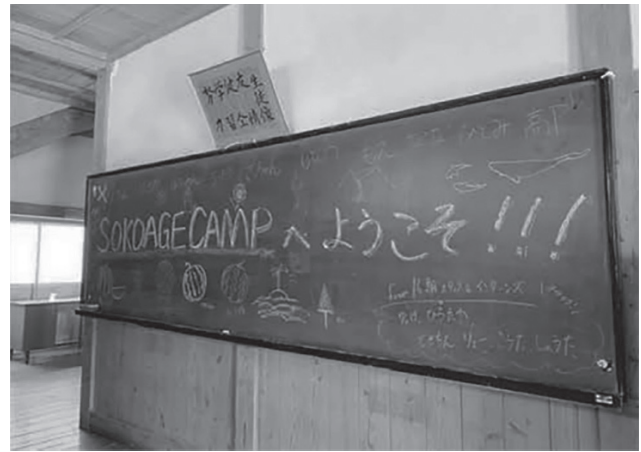
### (3) Certified NPO Sokoage (<https://sokoage.org/>)

Following the Great East Japan Earthquake, many organizations started working with children in the Tohoku region. Sokoage is an organization established in Kesennuma by its president, Hiroaki Yabe, and other members who began working as volunteers in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Although it began operations as a volunteer organization, it obtained NPO status in 2012 to conduct activities over the long term. It supports high school students in Tohoku to think about what they want and can do for their hometowns, and to take action. The

Tohoku region is experiencing an ongoing decline in the number of children and an aging population, with many young people leaving for major metropolitan areas. As such, one of the critical issues it faces is securing the personnel needed to build sustainable communities. To this end, Sokoage promotes partnerships and collaborations with the Kesennuma City Hall, the Board of Education, and other NPOs, to enable high school students to engage in community-based activities so that they can develop their ability to learn independently and solve problems. One of the goals of the organization is to nurture a sense of affection for one's hometown through these activities. There are already some young people who left for cities but have now returned, and others who are working for NPOs to tackle social issues.

Sokoage is also committed to developing young talent and runs a program called Sokoage Camp for university students (Figure 6-3). In a society that, despite enjoying a certain degree of prosperity, is beset by uncertainty and dim prospects for the future, many young people are seeking opportunities to think about what they want to do and what they want to become. Putting one's thoughts and values into words, and having friends to share them with, not only establishes one's position in society, but also helps them develop a sense of meaning about their own existence. In a world where travel between regions can become difficult, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's important that people have other people nearby whom they can turn to when needed. In 2022, Sokoage decided to roll out the program to three regions outside Miyagi Prefecture (Hiroshima, Yamagata, and Fukushima prefectures). Past

Figure 6-3: Sokoage Camp program (courtesy of Sokoage)



participants have returned as interns and program administrators. By working on the delivery side, they learn how to reflect and share their experiences with others, which they then incorporate into activities in their communities. It is hoped that expanding the organization's activities outward in this way will produce an even greater impact (interview with Yusuke Saito, Deputy Representative Director, November 2, 2021).

#### (4) NPO Ishinomaki Reconstruction Support Network (<https://www.yappesu.jp/>)

There are several organizations that focus on the parents of children. The Ishinomaki Reconstruction Support Network was launched out of an awareness of the need for a place where people, especially mothers, can freely consult with each other and show mutual respect, ensuring that they do

not grow isolated in the reconstruction process. In addition, the organization helps women play an active role in the community by offering parenting support and assistance for starting their own businesses. Yoshie Kaneko, former Representative Director (2011-2022), had been interested in the issue of multicultural coexistence from before the disaster. After the disaster, she became involved in initiatives aimed at empowering women to play a part in their communities, ranging from community building to business start-up support, drawing on partnerships with companies and local government.

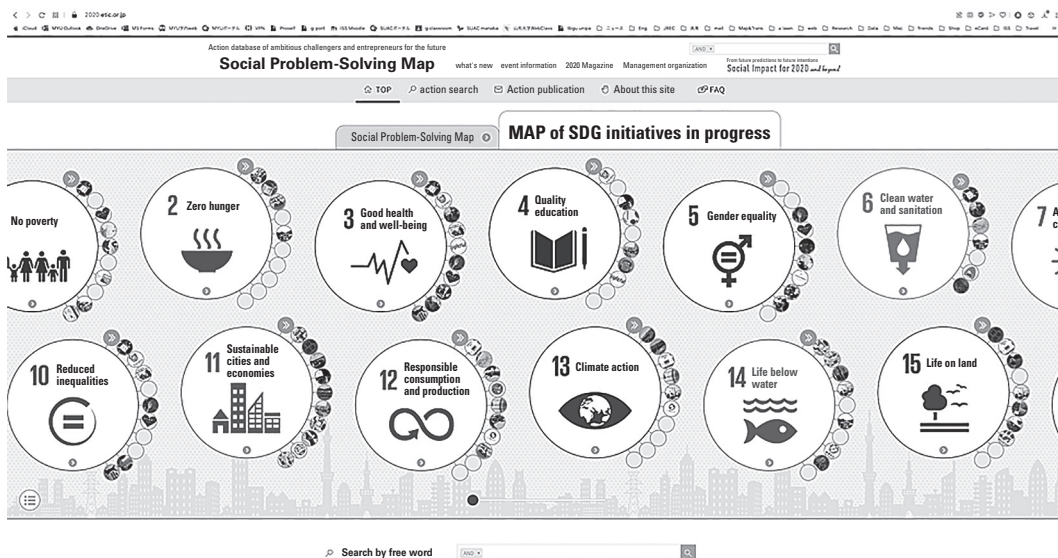
Ms. Kaneko suggests that to understand gender issues, it is vital to develop mutual recognition and to put it into words (interview with Ms. Kaneko, November 24, 2021). On the other hand, she feels that because the culture of the coastal city of Ishinomaki still has deep-seated notions

Figure 6-4: Activities conducted by the Ishinomaki Reconstruction Support Network (Left) Children's cafeteria event "Having fun with art" (Right) Mental health care counselors (courtesy of Ishinomaki Reconstruction Support Network)





Figure 6-5: Databases for visualizing NPO activities (homepage) (Source: <https://2020.etic.or.jp>)



about the social roles of men and women, gender issues are still difficult to discuss. Nevertheless, the impacts of the group’s persistent efforts are beginning to emerge. For example, incorporating hobbies into events for fathers has led more fathers and couples to attend seminars, and holding regular events for children has led young people (now in their mid-20s) to take a more cooperative attitude toward parenting. Another positive result of the group’s work in promoting women’s participation is that local people who took part in its women’s empowerment projects are now serving as speakers for the Ishinomaki City Women’s Human Resource Development Seminar.

### (5) Initiatives for Visualizing the SDGs

ETIC is a non-profit organization that trains social entrepreneurs who can produce social impacts. To help visualize the work of organizations working on local and social issues, ETIC developed databases for a “Social Problem-Solving Map” and an “SDGs Map” (Figure 6-5). For the former, it created categories to identify activities that aim to solve local and social issues, while the latter allows users to search for organizations working on the 17 different SDGs. What is interesting about these databases is that they not only highlight the organizations carrying out the activities, but also provide information for companies who may wish to support them.

What these NPOs have in common is that they properly frame regional or social problems and promote innovative or policy-driven approaches. Each group focuses on partnerships to address social issues, with some emphasizing collaboration with government or business, some involving advocates and supporters, and still others encouraging new participants to become the next generation of supporters. They also develop policy proposals and advocate for addressing social issues using public systems and institutions.

Since the NPOs involved in civic activities are not very large, it is also important for them to increase their social impact by taking advantage of social structures such as corporations, governments, and NPO alliances. For example, the term “policy entrepreneur” has been gaining attention in Japan in recent years, a label discussed by public policy scholar Michael Mintrom, who examined the commonalities among the people responsible for these types of activities and the strategies they employ (M. Mintrom, *Policy Entrepreneurs and Dynamic Change*, 2020). Ten years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake, and we are seeing many changes in the representatives of organizations in the affected areas of Tohoku. In several of the groups discussed above, the baton is being passed to the next generation of staff. Given the current climate created by the SDGs, it is essential to nurture entrepreneurs who will contribute to solving social issues.

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