The Contribution of Local Foreign Residents Committees to Multicultural Cohesion: Comparing Hamamatsu City and Aichi Prefecture

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Introduction

Foreign residents committees, which are one of many types of activities conducted by local governments in Japan to promote multicultural cohesion, are now active in 33 localities across the country. This study analyses the contribution that these meetings can make to realising multicultural cohesion, based on a field study of 2 local governments – Hamamatsu City and Aichi Prefecture. The study involved interviews at the responsible section of each local government, observation conducted between 2009 and 2011, as well as analysis of related documents.

Dialogue, Political Participation and Multicultural Cohesion

Multicultural Cohesion (tabunka-kyosei) as defined by the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications is 'people of different nationalities and ethnicities living together as members of the community while recognizing each other's cultural differences and trying to build relationships as equals' (MPMHAPT, 2006). Foreign residents committees can contribute to multicultural coexistence based on 3 concepts: political participation of minorities, dialogue between minorities and the Japanese majority, and dialogue with the bureaucracy.

When offered a chance to participate in the political sphere, minorities may discover their latent desire to do so. As a result, they may actively seek other forms of participation, and develop their identity as citizens. This will encourage them to participate in various aspects of society, and contribute to the realisation of the goal 'living together as members of the community'. It will also promote awareness of their democratic right to speak, and improve their status in society, leading to the building of 'relationships as equals'.

Through dialogue, minorities and the majority can relativise their cultural values, fostering inter-cultural understanding, which is also essential to Multicultural Cohesion. Minorities with higher social status can act as mediators between those with lower status (eg refugees, unskilled workers) and the majority. In this way, majorities can realise that the xenophobia often associated with these lower-status migrants is unfounded. As both sides experience acculturation, group boundaries that cause inequality and repression are destabilised and societal structure can begin to see a transformation that leads to the rectifying of inequalities.

There are few opportunities for minorities to engage in dialogue with the bureaucracy. When this dialogue is achieved, not only is the bureaucracy able to create policies based on a better understanding of the problems faced by minorities, but minorities are also given the chance to have their voices heard and reflected in those policies. It also builds valuable trust between these two groups.

Analysis of the Role of Foreign Residents Meetings: Hamamatsu City and Aichi Prefecture

Hamamatsu City and Aichi Prefecture were taken as examples because, while at different levels of government, both are home to large populations of foreign residents and have been making efforts to promote Multicultural Cohesion. The Hamamatsu City Council of Foreign Residents and the Aichi Foreign Residents Meeting were established in 2008 and 2002 respectively, and each recruit members to convene and discuss policy several time per year.

In order to act as a realm for political participation, the constituency of committee members must be representative of

the foreign resident population as a whole (homeland, visa status, employment/lifestyle, Japanese proficiency level), there must be knowledge of the existence and importance of the committee, and its autonomy and effectiveness must be ensured. Of the two committees, Hamamatsu City Council of Foreign Residents offers greater representation, greater autonomy of discussion topic selection, and further implementation of recommendations. The effectiveness of Aichi's committee loses effectiveness as it is not established under a legal ordinance, but its unique strength lies in its allowing participation of foreign residents who have Japanese citizenship. Both committees are weakened by lack of support for non-Japanese speaking participants, common knowledge of the committee and follow-up of recommendation implementation, and are threatened by the risk of becoming superficial institutions controlled by the bureaucracy.

While both committees offer opportunities for the minority and majority to engage in indirect dialogue by making meetings open to the public and publicising their results, very few people join the audience and there are few mediums to access these results. The public needs to be made aware of the existence and importance of the committees. In order to facilitate direct dialogue, ideally members of the Japanese majority should also be allowed to participate as committee members, on an equal level with minorities.

Finally, both committees, but especially Aichi Prefecture, are facilitating dialogue between minorities and the bureaucracy, in that the bureaucracy can listen directly to the ideas and opinions of minorities. However, little dialogue is encouraged between the bureaucracy and the non-Japanese speaking minority, or minorities and the central government.

Conclusion – Potential and Limitations

While the Aichi Foreign Residents Meeting places greater emphasis on facilitating dialogue between minorities and the bureaucracy, Hamamatsu City Foreign Residents Committee's main aim is offering an opportunity for political participation to foreigners who do not possess voting rights. Legalising committees by passing ordinances, establishing interpreting systems and systems to follow-up on implementation of recommendations, and incorporating participation of Japanese residents may help to further promote Multicultural Cohesion. Finally, given the recent development of a Multicultural Cohesion policy by the central government, it may become necessary to establish a federal multicultural advisory committee to promote minority political participation and dialogue at the national level.

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