

## Minamata and Ashikita Regional Strategic Platform Providing Opportunities for Citizens' Participation and Collaboration and "Minamata Studies"

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### Minamata disease --- The Starting Point of Environmental Pollution, 57 Years after the Official Identification of the Disease

It is estimated that after 1932, the Minamata factory of Chisso Corporation discharged 70-150 tons or more of organic mercury, a liquid waste product from the acetaldehyde manufacturing process, into the entire Shiranui Sea, including Minamata Bay. Hajime Hosokawa, director of the hospital attached to the factory, reported to the Minamata Health Center on May 1, 1956 that many local people were developing a central nervous system disease of unknown cause, and this was later designated as the day when Minamata disease was officially identified. Over half a century has passed since then, and the disease has carved out a history of 56 years, but all the associated problems have not been solved yet.<sup>1), 2)</sup>

After the Supreme Court's October 2004 decision in the Minamata Disease Kansai Lawsuit, which became the first verdict to confirm that the national and Kumamoto prefectural governments were liable for compensation for their failure to prevent damage due to the disease from spreading, the number of persons in Kumamoto and Kagoshima Prefectures whose application for certification had not been processed increased to 8,282 (as of the end of July 2010). It was estimated that those in their fifties or younger (patients with fetal or infantile Minamata disease) accounted for nearly half of the total. The number of patients to whom the Kumamoto prefectural government had started to issue a new health book (which constitutes part of the measures the Ministry of the Environment announced to help uncertified patients following the Supreme Court's ruling, and covers all medical expenses the patients themselves are supposed to pay under the national health insurance system) since November 2005 exceeded 27,000. Only a small percentage of these patients withdrew their application to be certified as a patient with the Minamata disease in accordance with the Pollution-Related Health Damage Compensation Law and had a new health book issued to them, and the national and prefectural governments' plans to decrease the number of certified patients went sour.

With the enactment and enforcement of the Special Measures Law for the Relief of Victims of the Minamata Disease and the Solution of Minamata Problems in 2009, however, the situation surrounding victims of the disease, particularly uncertified patients (including many latent ones), underwent a complete change. Relevant local prefectural governments began to accept applications for relief measures in May 2011, and ended it on July 31 this year. The number of accepted applications finally reached 65,151, far exceeding the number that the Ministry of the Environment had initially predicted (a little over 30,000). As of May 2012, on the other hand, the number of persons whose application for certification had not been processed fell sharply to 313, because patients are entitled to receive relief under the Special Measures Law on condition that they give up being certified as having Minamata disease in accordance with the Pollution-Related Health Damage Compensation Law and drop their application for certification.

Meanwhile, to restore the environment of Minamata Bay, a ¥48.5 billion project to treat sludge that had accumulated in Minamata Bay (65% of which was financed by Chisso and 35% by the national and prefectural governments) started in 1975 and was completed in 1990.<sup>3), 4)</sup> Currently, the former industrial waste processing site is utilized as Eco-Park Minamata, and 1.5 million cubic meters of mercury sludge and thousands of drums containing mercury-contaminated fish in concrete are buried under it (Figure 1). The reclaimed land is separated by cellular steel sheet piles from the surrounding sea, but there is concern that mercury sludge may leak out, because more than 30 years have passed since the launch of the project. Cellular steel sheet piles are believed to last 50 years, and in February 2009, the Kumamoto prefectural government set up a committee to review this



*Fig. 1 Minamata Bay Reclaimed Land (Dec, 2005)*

issue because it needed to take measures for the deteriorating cellular steel sheet piles, and because the earthquake standards for port and harbor facilities were revised in 2007.

## **Minamata Studies, a New Academic Branch to Use Lessons from Past Mistakes for the Future**

Over half a century has passed since the Minamata disease was officially identified. Today, each and every one of us has to squarely face the history and present status of the Minamata incident again as victims of the disease have cut their way through all sorts of problems with the aid of supporters.

All of us who live today are urged to use lessons from past mistakes for the future, and this is the minimum responsibility we have to take for future generations. “Using lessons from past mistakes for the future” as referred to in this article means that all people should pay attention to problems in their communities and take actions to solve them across the boundaries of fractionalized fields of expertise and the frameworks of laymen and specialists. At the same time, it means that each and every one of us has to review his or her lifestyle and the way a society based on mass-production and mass-consumption should be.

In April 2005, based on this concept, Kumamoto Gakuen University established the Open Research Center for Minamata Studies with three projects as the main pillars of its research, studies, and practice. Project 1 “Research on Health and Social Issues Concerning the Present Situations and Reevaluation of the Damages by Minamata Disease” involves an attempt to clarify the damage that the disease caused through research and studies with close ties with the local communities concerned. It takes the approach of not only looking at the aspect of health hazards but also takes the impoverished conditions of affected individuals and local communities into consideration, the effects of the disease on local economies, and so forth. In Project 2 “Proposal of Community Rehabilitation Model in the Minamata and Ashikita Regions” various local people join forces or collaborate to find regional reconstruction policies and establish a platform to enable them to propose a strategic policy. Project 3 “Data Acquisition, Database Creation, and Worldwide Dissemination of Materials Related to Minamata Studies” aims to accumulate results obtained from Projects 1 and 2 and use them for the future.

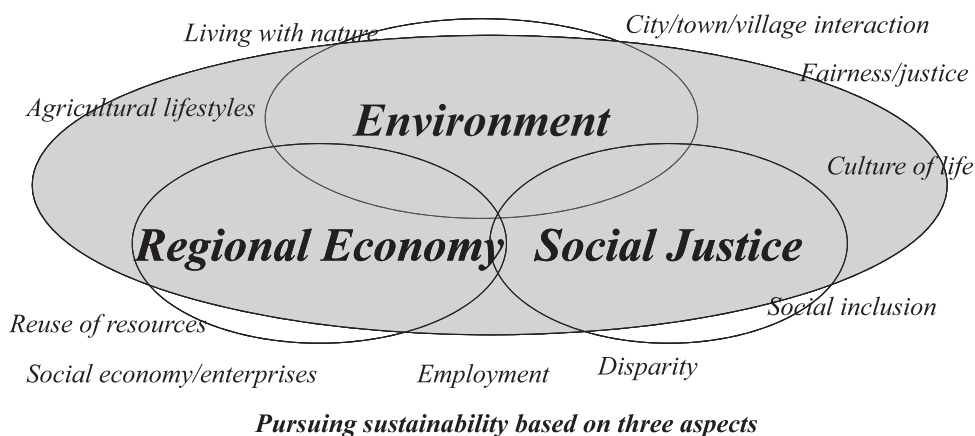
As the main pillar of Project 2 mentioned above, the Minamata-Ashikita Regional Strategic Platform started efforts to provide a forum to think about the next 50 years of the Minamata and Ashikita regions by involving various people concerned with these communities. This article describes what the Platform aims at and discusses the results obtained so far and issues to be addressed in the future.<sup>5)</sup>

## What Is the Minamata-Ashikita Regional Strategic Platform?

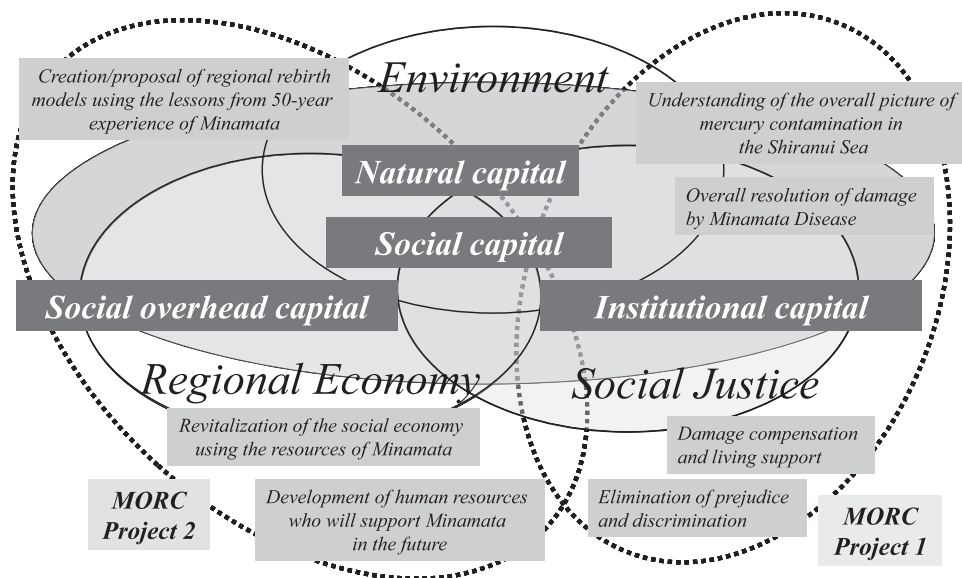
The Minamata-Ashikita Regional Strategic Platform provides local citizens, NPOs, researchers, private businesses, administrative officials, and other diverse stakeholders with venues for meetings, exchanges, learning, mutual understanding, discussion, and the establishment of relationships (development of social capital) as they attempt, based on the Minamata incident as their negative legacy, to question again how their lifestyles, ways of living as human beings, and local communities (such as the environment, welfare, economy, and education) should be. It is also positioned as a place where knowledge and information are acquired, accumulated, and communicated to explore new possibilities of their local communities. Furthermore, it is viewed as a place for diverse supporters of local communities (social actors) where they can learn, realize, grow, and transform.

This platform expects the Open Research Center for Minamata Studies to play its role as a facilitator of Minamata studies making maximal use of the University's intellectual and human resources as well as its facilities and equipment.

What this platform aims at is summarized into two points. One is to realize sustainable communities in Minamata and Ashikita. This means pursuing the sustainability of communities from the three perspectives of environmental protection, local economy, and social justice, and create dynamic movements to realize communities in Minamata and Ashikita where everyone can demonstrate his or her potential to the full and live an affluent life that suits him or her the best -- communities where everyone wants to continue living for ever (Figure 2).



**Fig. 2 Aims of the Regional Strategic Platform**  
: Achieving sustainability in the Minamata-Ashikita Region



*Fig. 3 What is Needed Now to Achieve Sustainability in Minamata/Ashikita*

Figure 3 indicates the three elements of a sustainable society together with the subjects that the Open Research Center's Projects 1 and 2 view as issues they should address. Project 1 focuses on two of the three aspects of sustainability: the environment and social justice. The subjects involved include the need to obtain a general picture of mercury contamination in the Shiranui Sea, giving full particulars of damage caused by the Minamata disease, compensating victims for damage caused and supporting their lives, and eliminating prejudice and discrimination attributed to the disease. Project 2, meanwhile, focuses on two aspects: the environment and local economy. Its goals are, among others, to propose and build regional reconstruction models making the most of the experience gained from 50 years of fighting the Minamata disease, invigorate the regional society and economy using Minamata resources effectively, and develop human resources, who will lead the future generation in Minamata.

Another aim of the Platform is to create new public spaces that will provide the foundation for a sustainable local community (Figure 4). To facilitate a shift from the previous society leaving everything to administrative agencies to one in which its members participate in community development, the Platform is holding discussions about how to develop systems and human resources to ensure appropriate community governance through participation by a wide range of individuals, NPOs, and related organizations and collaboration among them.<sup>6)</sup>

Underlying these initiatives of the Platform are the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion in

1986 and the five action areas for health promotion identified in the Charter.<sup>7)</sup> In Particular, the Platform's initiatives, focusing on strengthening community action, developing personal skills, and building healthy public policy, aim to improve the quality of the lives of individuals living in these regions and the sustainability of local communities.

In Minamata, where various people living in its communities have long faced the Minamata incident from their respective standpoints, there are certain individuals and their networks that respond properly to various proposals submitted by administrative officials, citizens' groups, and local companies and put them into practice bringing out the best of them. The author believes that this strength will lead to the creation of new public spaces, where lessons from past mistakes will be used effectively for the future.



**Fig. 4 Aims of the Regional Strategic Platform**  
: Creating new public spaces

## From Holding the Citizens' Forum for Garbage Reduction to Putting Together Proposals

In April 2007, in order to address the subject of waste reduction and recycling, the Minamata city government and Kumamoto Gakuen University co-hosted a citizens' forum on garbage reduction after analyzing points at issue based on a report of the Platform's study group. Many citizens, including the promoters of garbage reduction and recycling, participated in this forum and expressed their opinions, based on the feeling of having lived life, in response to panelists' presentations. Subsequently, a group of Platform organizers again held discussions about the results of 15 years of garbage reduction and recycling in

Minamata City and issues to be addressed in the future, and put together the results of the discussions into five proposals for Minamata City's garbage policy. In July 2007, the group submitted these proposals to Mayor Miyamoto, and this prompted exchanges of opinions for implementation. The gist of the proposals is as follows:

Proposal 1: Shift from forecasting (playing Whack-A-Mole), to backcasting

Proposal 2: Shift from taking measures to dispose of waste (downstream measures) on the assumption that garbage is discharged (in terms of quantity and quality) to proposing and implementing measures based on the priorities of 3Rs (upstream measures)

Proposal 3: Maintain forums to ensure sharing of practical and easy-to-understand information on waste processing and disposal and continuous discussion about the issues

Proposal 4: Identify needs and issues unique to each community (at the garbage station and neighborhood association levels) and the results obtained

Proposal 5: Adopt a declaration on zero waste and cooperate with cities in Japan and abroad that have adopted a similar declaration

"Forecasting" as referred to in Proposal 1 implies a way of thinking that starts from the present state of affairs. Basically, it sets moderate goals that seem to be attainable now taking the present state of affairs into consideration. In other words, it does so strictly by accumulating what is considered achievable at the moment. With "backcasting," on the other hand, goal setters disregard the present state of affairs for the time being, clarify their vision and future aim, share it among themselves, and discuss their respective responsibilities and functions to realize the vision.<sup>8)</sup>

The zero waste declaration was adopted to stop building garbage treatment facilities on the assumption that garbage is discharged, and use the backcasting method to develop a vision of what garbage disposal should be (for example, avoid incineration or landfills) by involving a wide range of sectors in society and ensure that local residents, business firms, and administrative agencies work together to realize such a vision on equal footing. The basic policy for zero waste, called "4Ls," is local leadership, low cost, low environmental impact, and low technology. In Japan, Kamikatsu Town in Tokushima Prefecture and Oki Town in Fukuoka Prefecture have already made a zero waste declaration, and Hayama Town in Kanagawa Prefecture, Machida City in Tokyo and other municipalities are preparing to make such a declaration.

One movement aligned with the Proposals is the Round Table on Zero Waste, which began operation in January 2008 as a forum to ensure sharing of information on and continuous discussion about waste. At the Round Table, discussions are under way about specific action plans for waste reduction as well as other subjects like basic matters, such as how to operate the Round Table and choose its members. In November 2009, the Round Table used the backcasting method mentioned earlier to draft and announce the Minamata Declaration on Zero Waste City Planning. It also clarified unique tasks that each of the 26 autonomous districts in the city should address and expected results, and planned and conducted a resource station survey with the participation of citizens and government officials to look for the next step that should be taken for "Garbage 23 Sorting." In addition, discussions about the creation and operation of tea drinking spots are being held to facilitate a shift from recycling (one way) to reuse and reduction, and the test operation will start soon.

The framework of the Round Table is considered to be fully functioning as a forum to provide a foundation for the process of ensuring that diverse stakeholders share information on and discuss the regional task of waste reduction and recycling, promote mutual understanding, solve regional problems, and create new lifestyles and cultures in their communities.

## Past Efforts to Realize Sustainable Communities in Minamata and Ashikita

Nature abounds in Minamata, which includes mountains as well as the sea, and rivers that connect the two. The people of Minamata have pursued safe manufacturing and comfortable lifestyles while paying attention to the natural environment so that it is effectively used and not destroyed. An initiative known as a "whole village as a living museum," which is also described as the "village starting to put on makeup," emphasizes ties between people and between people and nature that are rooted in the region's traditional lifestyles and culture. It is symbolized by "Garbage 24 Sorting," which is attracting attention around the country as united, continuous efforts by citizens, administrative agencies, and businesses involved in waste reduction are evolving each year. Efforts are not limited to reducing incinerated garbage and landfills and the effective use of resources (recycling) but are developing into initiatives that deepen bonds between people in the community and even envisage the creation of new lifestyles and cultures keeping a shift from recycling to reuse in mind. Minamata City ranked first in the fourth (2004), fifth (2005), eighth (2008), and ninth (2009) Japan's Top Eco-City Contests hosted by the National Eco-City Contest Network, and in the tenth (2010) contest, it became the first local government to accomplish its deepest wish when it obtained the title of a National Eco-City.<sup>9)</sup>



What is needed today is a system of participation by citizens and collaboration to ensure that diverse stakeholders demonstrate their abilities to the full while respecting each other's characteristics and the differences between them and act voluntarily at their own initiative to solve public and local issues, and in doing so, establish new relationships and share the results thus obtained. We are urged to escape a society totally dependent on administrative agencies and shift to one in which citizens participate in community development. In the future, we will continue to gradually expand the scope of discussions so that the Regional Strategic Platform serves as a driving force behind efforts to realize such a society.

In the future, we will continue to squarely face challenges for Minamata to realize a lifestyle that is aligned with the pace of nature, an agricultural lifestyle with the basic principle of having enough time to feel, think, and enjoy, and which regards consideration for nature and other people as important, and a community where all the members live a meaningful life in their own way.

### **An Epilogue: Realizing a Society That Learns from Past Mistakes and Respects the Dignity of Life**

Minamata studies, which face the reality of victims of Minamata disease, and aim to return all results of studies to the local community and at the same time communicate them to the rest of the world crossing boundaries of fields of expertise and frameworks of laymen and specialists, urging each and every one of us to question again in the light of the Minamata incident how our lifestyles and society should be.

Dr. Masazumi Harada (who passed away on June 11 last year) considered it important to compare the symptoms of victims and the results of examinations with the social situation and context in which they lived and position health problems and the resultant difficulties as part of the victims' lives. He continued to ask what caused the Minamata incident (and what it comprised) while listening to victims without being bound by established medical theories, but always walking close to them.<sup>10)</sup>

Dr. Harada said, "Discrimination does not arise where there is environmental pollution, but environmental pollution occurs where there is discrimination and prejudice." I have been involved in the U.S. military base problem in Okinawa (Kadena base noise lawsuit) since 1995, and to me, this remark of his really strikes the heart of the problem and provides sharp insight into its essence.

The same applies to the accident (incident) at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station of Tokyo Electric Power Company, and the greatest sacrifice is forced on those who

being discriminated against. It must be remembered that the message of Dr. Harada, who always walked along close to victims of the Minamata disease, is directed not only to researchers, but also widely to all people who live today and the children in the next generation.

In fishing villages along the Shiranui Sea, aborigine settlements in Canada, and many other places, Dr. Harada and I have seen that people who have lived close to nature, such as the sea, forests, rivers, and lakes, became the first to accept the most serious sacrifice in their lives.<sup>11)</sup>

Human beings, who are only part of nature and one living species, live in a chain of millions of forms of life while enjoying the blessings of nature brought by the ecosystem of the earth. Today, despite this fact, we are utterly steeped in an anthropocentric way of thinking that gives top priority to economic efficiency. To break with this situation, we are urged to review our way of living and the entire social and economic systems symbolized by the recent nuclear disaster.

Taking over the deceased Dr. Harada's wish to learning from the history of past mistakes and using lessons from the Minamata disease for the future probably means to make sure that what each and every one of us learns is put into action and that we thus persistently continue to bring about small changes in local communities persistently.

In both Minamata and the areas stricken by the Great East Japan Earthquake, efforts are beginning to rebuild local communities where all forms of life are considered as important and all their members can lead comfortable lives by regaining ties between people, between people and nature, and between forests, rivers, and the sea. Each and every one of us should pay attention to his or her community's problems, find solutions to them while learning, realizing, growing, and changing together, and share them widely. The author believes that this will lead to the realization of a society where the dignity of its member's life is respected.

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## Abstract

Over half a century has passed since the Minamata disease was officially identified. Today, each and every one of us has to squarely face the history and present status of the Minamata incident again as victims of the disease have cut their way through all sorts of problems with the aid of supporters.

In April 2005, based on this concept, Kumamoto Gakuen University established the Open Research Center for Minamata Studies with three projects as the main pillars of its research, studies, and practice. Project 1 “Research on Health and Social Issues Concerning the Present Situations and Reevaluation of the Damages by Minamata Disease” involves an attempt to clarify the damage that the disease caused through research and studies with close ties with the local communities concerned. In Project 2 “Proposal of Community Rehabilitation Model in the Minamata and Ashikita Regions”, we proposed various local people join forces or collaborate to develop regional reconstruction policies and establish a platform to enable them to propose policies with a larger strategic goal. Project 3 “Data Acquisition, Database Creation, and Worldwide Dissemination of Materials Related to Minamata Studies” aims to accumulate results obtained from Projects 1 and 2 and use them for the future.

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