What a Small Town in Japan Learned in Appalachia

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Among all the organizations that I visited, the one that left the strongest impression was ACEnet.

I saw an overlap between the diverse, rootedin-the-community projects that ACEnet implements and projects that Foundingbase envisions undertaking in the communities in which we work. ACEnet supports small enterprises by building food production facilities and providing product development and sales support. They also provide loans for operating funds.

I was impressed with how ACEnet supported a company that sells sauce made from local ingredients. Initially the company came up with a great idea but had neither money nor a network. It secured a loan from ACEnet, used their facility, and was introduced to retailers. As a result, the company now has annual sales of more than $100M and is looking into expanding its business by investing in its own equipment. When a company like this launches and starts its business in a community, it requires various types of support. In Japan, the local government usually plays a major role. ACEnet worked with the local regional community and created a network to support small-sized entrepreneurs. Despite this difference in policy and approach, FoundingBase is trying to undertake a similar role and I learned a lot from ACEnet’s work.

Food markets are a very relevant topic. We organize a food market in Tsuwano, Shimane Prefecture in collaboration with the Town Hall and the local agricultural cooperative. The issue has been low sales despite the frequency of the market. ACEnet promotes the 30 Mile Meal Project. The goal is to encourage food markets, restaurants, and retailers to use and consume food produced within a 30-mile radius. As a result of their participation in the project, they attract consumers who appreciate that all the produce comes from the local area. This project reminded me of Japan’s locally produced, locally consumed concept. This project was not concerned about local government jurisdictions, but focused on where economic activities take place in the region. In other words, the project was not led by the efforts of local government.

With this in mind, after I returned to Tsuwano, FoundingBase organized a food market in Tsuwano. We decided not to limit the market to the local area or to see it only as an opportunity to sell our goods beyond the town of Tsuwano. We wanted to engage residents
living within a 50-km (30-mile) radius and the number of customers increased ten-fold. We expanded the target audience and decided to have a sales goal. We tried to be creative with marketing and changed the way we worked with local residents. The scale is still small but we think there is potential for growth. We want to pursue this direction and improve the quality of the market.

By learning about how things are done in the U.S., I realized that I sometimes accept things for how they are and do not think outside of the box. I want to explore ways to sell products and provide services that are not circumscribed by local government and regional jurisdictions and to promote collaboration in the local area to create vibrancy.