

Minamata City (Kumamoto Prefecture, Japan)

***Aiming to Create "an Industrial and Cultural City
which Values the Environment, Health and Welfare."***

(City Profile)

Minamata City is situated in the most southern corner of Kumamoto Prefecture. Its land area is 162.6 square kilometers; its population, about 32,000 people. With its average annual temperature at 16.8 degrees celsius and its average precipitation at 1,711 millimeters, it is characterized by a temperate oceanic climate with much rainfall.



Learning from the Minamata Disease

The Negative Legacy of Minamata City

The “Minamata Disease” broke out in the midst of rapid economic growth in Japan’s post-war rehabilitation period. Minamata’s name came to be widely known to the world because of its pollution.

It is common knowledge that the Minamata Disease was officially discovered in 1956 and was recognized by the national government in 1968 as a pollution disease. It is a disease of the nervous system caused by ingesting large quantities of fish and shellfish polluted by the organic mercury (methyl mercury compounds) discharged into Minamata Bay from Chisso Co., Ltd. Minamata Factory.

Due to the breakout of the Minamata Disease, the administration of Minamata City entered a thirty-year “period of deadlock.”

This was because the Minamata Disease not only caused an unimaginable level of health damage and destruction of nature, but also destroyed local community.

The small town of a population of 30,000 people, that once prospered with the operations of Chisso Co., Ltd., lost “local solidarity” once assailants and victims –the “minority group” of patients who sought compensation from Chisso Co., Ltd., the city and its citizens who sympathized with the victims but at the same time were dependent on the economic benefits generated by Chisso Co., Ltd. and those who came from all over Japan to support the victims - became members of the same community. The city eventually became one with antagonism, discrimination, slander, criticism and mutual distrust surging through it.

When discussing Minamata City's environmental policies, we cannot exclude its experience with pollution and the social structure following it; Minamata City's environmental administration has transformed its negative legacy into just the opposite and has displayed the power of an entire region working together.

From the "Period of Deadlock" to the Revival of the Local Community

How did the city bring itself out of deadlock and what kind of environmental policies resulted from it?

In 1990, the Minamata Bay Pollution Protection Project, a project undertaken to reclaim mercury-polluted land, was completed after thirteen years since its initiation. A vast piece of reclaimed land was made upon the many lives victimized by the Minamata Disease and the various emotions towards the issue. At this time, citizens had more than realized that "nothing is born from confrontation."

From the same year, Kumamoto Prefecture and Minamata City launched the "Environmental Creation and Development Project" and engaged in intensive dialogue. Although discussion was begun in confusion and hesitation, continued efforts of opinion exchange and conversation brought citizens to regain the energy to regenerate the local community, thus creating opportunities where victims and citizens who were not victimized and employees from Chisso Co., Ltd. would meet together; mutual understanding and dialogue eventually became a common affair.

In 1994, patients, supporters, citizens and the administration began to work together. At the Minamata Victims Memorial Service held on May 1, the mayor expressed his regret, or apologized, for the first time on behalf of the administration, that it had not taken enough measures. His speech accelerated dialogue between victims and the government, and in 1995, with the national government's Cabinet decision on the final plan for the settlement of the Minamata Disease issue, the issue finally moved toward political resolution. Furthermore, the dispute, which had continued for forty years, saw political conclusion in 1996, after which the "Creation of a Model Environmental City" movement became full-scale, making the most of the sacrifices made to the Minamata Disease to reconstruct the inner society and to regenerate the local community and Minamata City.



From a Negative to Positive Legacy

The Backbone of Minamata City's Environmental Policies: "Minamata City Comprehensive Plan"

Minamata City had made a big step towards becoming a city promoting advanced environmental measures.

The "Minamata City Comprehensive Plan," which was formulated with public participation, altered the city's future vision of becoming an "Industrial and Touristic City" to an "Industrial and Cultural City which Values the Environment, Health and Welfare."

Mayor Yoshii, who assumed office in 1994, says:

"The name "Minamata" is known worldwide. However, the image that this name represents is a dark one. Yet, I find the notoriety of our name to be magnificent. We must value the fact that our name is well-known and change Minamata. I believe that it is important for Minamata's citizen to change – change minuses to pluses. This means that because we are a city that suffered from environmental experiences, we must turn this picture around and become a city that takes the best care of the environment in all of the world.

I believe the future image of Minamata City to be a city where the environment is considered in everything including citizens' lives and industrial activities."

Mayor Yoshii's idea was not only the administrative view but also the Minamata citizens' view. The formulation of the Comprehensive Plan had involved intensive public participation.

The Formulation Process of "Minamata City Comprehensive Plan" and "Minamata Primary Projects for the Environment"

The Minamata Primary Projects for the Environment was developed simultaneously with the Comprehensive Plan. The drafting of a Plan is often commissioned to consultants, but Minamata City declared that its Plans would be made by its staff and citizens. In the two years following 1994, two open assemblies were held in all districts for direct dialogue with local resident and citizens who were appointed based on their application essays continuously met once every week for six months. This resulting in a proposal made solely by the citizens. Young staff at City Hall developed a project and presented their opinions. These were collaborated into Minamata City's Comprehensive Plan and Minamata Primary Projects for the Environment.

Minamata City has given these plans Local Agenda 21 status and has positioned them as measures that are to be implemented under the collaboration of the administration, citizens and businesses.

Minamata City's Environmental Policies

Minamata City's environmental administration made a significant step forward with the Comprehensive Plan, which redirected Minamata City towards pursuing a policy that lays great importance on the environment and with starting the exhausted local society's regeneration from environmental aspects.

This movement originated in the "Environmental Creation and Development Program" (1990-1998) in which citizens joined forces to advocate for the regeneration of Minamata City through co-living as a first step towards the conclusion of unresolved issues. Hence, the city squarely approached the Minamata Disease to organize the Minamata Disease Victims Memorial Service as well as work to solve the issues regarding the relief of victims. In 1992, the city declared the "Creation of a Model Environmental City"; in March 1996, formulated the "Minamata Primary Projects for the Environment" and built the framework for the creation of an environmental model city; and at present, is engaged in many advanced environmental measures. Major measures are introduced below:

(Minamata City has prepared a detailed website. Our readers are recommended to refer to the website at <http://island.qqq.or.jp/hp/minamata.city/> for more information.)

Individual Measures

(1) Waste Management

A. 21 Categories for Waste Materials

Minamata City's waste segregation measure, which was initiated in 1993, is characterized by its requirement for waste materials to be classified into 21 categories and by the citizens' enthusiasm towards its implementation.

In the early 1990's when many citizens would still say, "What is all the fuss about environmental conservation? How can we pursue that and feed ourselves at the same time?" the success of the divided waste collection and disposal system contributed greatly to dispel this skepticism and rapidly increase public awareness towards environmental issues.

It is said that divided waste collection began after a propane gas cylinder was disposed with other trash and exploded in the incinerator, destroying it.

This system is not implemented by the city but by citizens, who classify waste materials into 21 categories. Three hundred waste collection stations have been established for every one hundred households and are operated fully by citizens.

The city only comes to collect the divided waste to take to the disposal sites.

This project is a successful case that is being undertaken as a symbolic example of regional regeneration.



A by-product from the project is the economic effect it brings. The revenue from selling recyclable waste to resource collectors is returned and allocated to each neighborhood association. The city, on the other hand, has successfully reduced the financial burden due to waste collection and reclamation measures.

Yet another valuable by-product is the generation of local communication.

B. Waste Reduction

Because waste cannot be reduced just by division, the “Waste Reduction Women’s Liaison Conference” was established in 1997. The group is actively involved in such activities as appealing to citizens “not to bring waste into the household, to prolong the life of each product and to purchase reused or recycled goods.” They have negotiated with supermarkets to abolish excessive packaging through a “Food Tray Ban Agreement.” Furthermore, they have worked with Minamata City in acknowledging cooperative stores as environment friendly stores in a “Eco Shop Program”. Thirteen stores are currently promoting the system.

C. Miscellaneous

Many other programs are also supportive of waste reduction and recycling. “My Household ISO” and “School Environmental ISO, ” both of which will be explained later and “District Environmental Agreements” (currently concluded in six districts), in which residents have promised to follow common environment-related living rules in an effort to protect their own environment on their own.

(Ripple Effect)

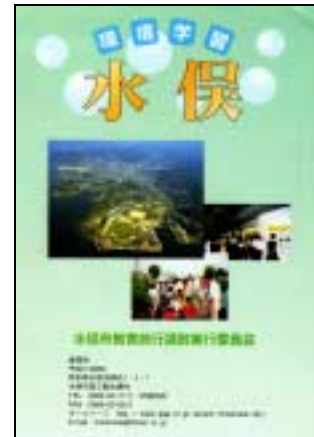
At present, many inspection visitors and student visitors on school excursions come to Minamata City. Minamata City’s advanced waste management measures are the center of attention; it can even be said that its waste measures constitute its touristic resources.

(2) Educational Tours (School Excursions)

Minamata City accepts educational tours that require accommodation for environmental education.

Most of its visitors on education tours are middle school students and high school students. School excursions are planned so that students can learn about what the Minamata Disease is or, about what kind of measures are taken for environmental conservation. Educational tours programmed so that participants can have an opportunity to hear directly from patients of the Minamata Disease and actually experience waste division; they are quite popular.

The tours are guided by civic volunteers including members of the Municipal Assembly, employees of Chisso Co. Ltd., and Minamata Disease victims.



(3) Minamata Prize for the Environment

In 1992, Minamata City established the “Minamata Prize for the Environment,” an international award recognizing groups or individual persons who have made significant achievements in activities or research concerning environmental conservation. Fifteen groups and three individuals, among which is a group that is involved with the conservation of mangrove woods in Indonesia, from the eligible regions of Japan, East Asia and Southeast Asia have been awarded.

(4) Environmental Master Program

The “Environmental Master Program,” initiated in 1998, aims to elevate the social status of artisans and utilize their wisdom in community building by having the mayor recognize those artisans, farmers and fishermen who are engaged in making environment friendly crafts as “Environmental Masters.”

Applicants are judged and those who have been found eligible must attend lectures on basic knowledge on the Minamata Disease, the structure of natural ecosystems and basic information on toxic substances such as environmental hormones (or hormone-disrupting substances) to be acknowledged as “Environmental Masters.”

As of March 2000, fourteen people including those engaged in organic tea cultivation, additive-free roasted and dried small fry production, unbleached paper manufacturing and

rice cultivation using crosses between domestic and wild ducks have received acknowledgement.

(5) International Exchange

Minamata City, conveying the message of “the lessons of the Minamata Disease,” dispatches both victims and administrative staff to “International Environmental Pollution Forum” hosted by the Environment Agency, travels to Asian countries once a year and plans to host international conventions, namely, “The Eighth Environmental Local Government Council” and “The Mansfield International Environmental Conference” in 2000 and the “The Sixth International Conference on Mercury as an Environmental Pollutant.”

Furthermore, the city accepts JICA trainees and inspection groups from China, Korea, Southeast Asia, Mongolia and Brazil.

(6) ISO14001 Accreditation

In February 1999, Minamata City received ISO14001 accreditation, an international standard for environmental management systems; Chisso Co. Ltd. followed in July.

In Chisso Co. Ltd.’s case, it included its subsidiaries and affiliates and thus, it can be said that Minamata City became an ISO town.

In addition to the other movements that were boosted in Minamata, owing greatly to the rise in public awareness, the Minamata Chamber of Youth and the city established the “Household ISO Program,” where each household sets five goals achievable through cooperative efforts among the family for the mayor to acknowledge. 62 households have currently received acknowledgement.

The “School ISO Program” has also been established and is scheduled to be implemented in all elementary and middle schools throughout the city by April 2000.

And to the Future

During the past ten years, Minamata City has been almost completely successful in every step that it has taken up to today: first in providing relief for the victims of the Minamata Disease (from apologies to political solution), secondly in the reconstruction of a shattered inner society(local community) (from dialogue to cooperation), thirdly in the presentation of the ideal future image for the city (“Minamata City Comprehensive Plan” and “Minamata Primary Projects for the Environment”) and fourthly in the implementation of concrete measures aiming towards the realization of its future image.

With “industrial promotion” a new issue for the city, Minamata City has begun its efforts towards energizing its exhausted industries and entering the economic regeneration stage. The city seeks to lay the fundamentals of industrial promotion on the

creation of “environmental businesses”.

In conclusion, let us refer to the words spoken by the Mayor of Minamata City who has led the administration with strong public support.

“The human race is now strongly requested to realize that everyone is an assailant as well as a victim. The basis of environmental problems is the people’s environmental consciousness.

How do we reform people’s awareness and heighten it? It is easier said than done logically and in detail. I am proud to say that Minamata’s practices, which have resulted from overcoming a tragic case of pollution and aiming to become an environmental model city, will surely provide good assistance in finding an answer.”



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Case Study