

Local Government Amalgamation in Japan:

Creating a New Local Governance or New Crisis of Governance?

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Introduction

The promotion of decentralization is a world-wide phenomenon during the past quarter century (Jun and Wright 1996). Rhetoric and theory of decentralization promises better governance and deeper democracy (Grindle 2007: 2). However, decentralization is not always beneficial for local democracy. Over the decades, national governments around the world have reduced the number of municipalities (Sancton 2000; Meligrana 2004; Dollery et al. 2008a; CEMR 2009). Political leaders would justify their decentralization strategy saying that municipal amalgamation enhances the administrative capacity and efficiency of local government to prepare ground for further devolution and decentralization (Wollmann 2009). However, a large-scale reorganization of local government may have an adverse impact on local people's sense of identity, and thus weaken the link between the citizen and his or her local authority (CEMR 2009). In a larger territory, reformists put too much emphasis on administrative efficiency in the delivery of public services. It should be noted that decentralization based on economic theory may promote horizontal centralization of local government through consolidation by merger (Dollery and Robotti 2008b). In this orientation, the strategy of decentralization has an adverse impact on local democracy.

In Japan the promotion of decentralization is one of the most important public sector reform issues since the 1980s (Koike and Wright 1998). In the process of decentralization, the Government has emphasized that municipalities (cities, towns, and villages) should be merged or consolidated and their administrative and financial capacity should be strengthened for the provision of basic public services without significant assistance from the central government. As in other nations, the proponents of decentralization put more emphasis on administrative efficiency in local government. In the end, local democracy has been forgotten in the discussion of decentralization.

In order to accelerate municipal merger, the Government amended the Municipal Merger Law in 1995 to provide a variety of financial benefits to the merger of municipalities. However, most of the municipalities were silent on voluntary amalgamation. In 2003 the Cabinet suddenly announced a cut in the allocation of the Local Allocation Tax Fund by an amount of 3 trillion yen (approximately 25 billion US dollars). It had an immediate effect because most of the municipalities were faced at with fiscal retrenchment. Poor municipalities were forced to join with neighboring municipalities to avoid bankruptcy. Finally, the total number of municipalities decreased from 3,218 in 2002 to 1,820 in 2006.

What happens after amalgamation? Population movements were immediately started from the periphery to the city center after amalgamation. Local residents in the periphery lost not only their municipal office but also their electoral representation in local assembly. It accelerates widening gap between center and periphery. In a larger context, without any governmental intervention, decentralization appears to widen the gap between rich and poor regions in the nation

Table 1 Number of Municipalities 1883–2008

Year	Cities	Town	Village	Total
1883	19	12,194	59,284	71,497
1893	48	1,173	13,068	14,289
1945	205	1,797	8,518	10,520
1953	286	1,966	7,616	9,968
1957	500	1,918	1,448	3,866
1965	560	2,005	827	3,392
1995	663	1,994	577	3,234
2002	675	1,981	562	3,218
2006	779	844	197	1,820
2008	783	817	195	1,795

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (2008).

(Tarrow 1977). This is currently happening in Japan.

After the massive municipal amalgamation ended, the Japanese electorate gave more seats to the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the election of House of Councilors in July 2007. DPJ campaigned across the country appealing to redress urban-rural disparity which has been enlarged under the “Structural Reform” policy of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). It boosted awareness of the negative side of neo-liberal reforms in the periphery. In the general election in August 2009, DPJ defeated LDP by a landslide. It is the first time in the postwar era that happened a change in government by the single opposition party winning a majority of seats.

Municipal Amalgamation in Japan¹⁾

As shown in the Table 1, there were three main periods in the modern history of Japan when the number of municipalities decreased (Mabuchi 2001). The first period was the late nineteenth century. In 1888, the Government enacted the Town and Village Act. Based on the Act, the Government consolidated small towns and villages to establish local administrative units with an average 300–500 households. As a result, the number of towns and villages was reduced from 71,497 in 1883 to 14,289 in 1893, while forming 29 cities. The second large-scale municipal amalgamation happened in the 1950s. The Diet enacted the Municipal Amalgamation Promotion Act in 1953 to consolidate small towns and villages and set up large municipalities with an average population of 8,000. According to Ministry of Home Affairs, the prefecture governors took the lead in making the consolidation plans. Consequently, the number of municipalities decreased from 9,968 in 1953 to 3,866 in 1957.

In 1965, the Government enacted the Law for Special Measures on Municipal Amalgamation (otherwise known as the Municipal Amalgamation Law) to further promote municipal consolidation or merger. The law provided a variety of exceptional measures to facilitate voluntary amalgamation of municipalities. In short, the Government changed its approach to the merger of local government units. This was due to the fact that a centrist approach resorted to in the 1950s triggered much friction among communities and provoked resistance against the municipal mergers. Accordingly, the Municipal Amalgamation Law afforded a wide range of special provisions to benefit consolidated or merged municipalities. For instance, the Law guaranteed the amount of local allocation tax to a consolidated or merged municipality for a period of 10 years even after the amalgamation was completed. In addition, there was expediency in

the issuance of municipal bonds to finance the costs of new city planning. Also, the composition and period of service of local assembly members were given particular consideration.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, however, the voluntary amalgamation of municipalities was not achieved as expected. The Government extended the Law in 1975 and 1985. During the period from 1965 to 1995, a total of 145 consolidations or mergers were completed and the reduction of 158 municipalities was achieved. In 1995, the Government again extended the Municipal Amalgamation Law for another 10 years. In that same year, the Government also enacted the Decentralization Promotion Act of 1995 as per the recommendations of the Decentralization Promotion Committee. The Committee submitted its first report in 1996 and a second one in 1997. The most influential recommendation of the Committee was the abolition of the "Agency Delegation Functions" system. This means the elimination of central control delegated to the heads of local government units from the ministerial administrative hierarchies (Koike and Wright 1998). Furthermore, the Decentralization Promotion Committee emphasized the need to consolidate small municipalities and strengthen their administrative and fiscal capacity to transfer national functions to local government. In 1995 the Government amended the Municipal Amalgamation Law to introduce the residents' initiative system in the establishment of the amalgamation conference (*gappei kyogikai*). It authorized voters to initiate amalgamation conference with the signatures of at least 1/50 of the local electorate. In spite of the introduction of the direct measure, local voters were silent. Only 3 amalgamations were achieved as of 1999.

1999 saw a change of attitude on the part of the Government. The Municipal Amalgamation Law was amended to conform to the provisions of the Omnibus Decentralization Law of 1999. Under the Municipal Amalgamation Law, as amended, prefectural governors were given a major role in the promotion of municipal amalgamation and encouraged by the Ministry of Home Affairs to lead in the compilation of municipal amalgamation plans in their respective areas of jurisdiction. Correspondingly, in the year 2000, the Liberal Democratic Party revealed its policy to reduce the number of municipalities by 1,000. In the same year, two influential national advisory bodies—the Local Institution Research Council and the Decentralization Promotion Committee—recommended the promotion of municipal amalgamation to the Cabinet. Pursuant to these recommendations, the Cabinet included the promotion of municipal amalgamation in the Government's "Major Policies for Administrative Reform" in December 1, 2000.

In the meantime, the newly formed Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy (CEFP), a national policy planning body, published its Basic Policy of 2001. In that policy paper, the CEFP suggested that municipalities with a population of 300,000 should be given more functions, while those exercised by small municipalities should be reduced and eventually replaced by the prefectural government. The CEFP also proposed that the Government should decrease financial assistance to municipalities as a way of promoting decentralization. Suddenly in 2003, the Ministry of Finance announced a 12% reduction (3 trillion yen) in the Local Allocation Tax for local government for the FY2004. In order to avoid fiscal bankruptcy, many municipalities immediately took actions to combine with one another. Table 1 reveals that the number of municipalities was reduced by nearly half in three years.

In view of the rush for municipal amalgamations, the Government amended the Municipal Amalgamation Law in 2004 and extended the acceptance of amalgamation applications from concerned parties until March 31, 2005. However, there were still other municipalities which failed to submit their applications for amalgamation during the extension period. Therefore, the Government enacted a new Municipal Amalgamation Law in May 2005, but removed the provision on the issuance of extraordinary municipal bonds for local community renovation.

In the end, the Government reduced the number of municipalities within a short period of time. As shown in the Table 2, nearly 2,000 municipalities were involved in municipal mergers in a decade. The number of municipalities then decreased to 1,822 by March 2006. Though it was far from the target of 1,000 municipalities, the reduction in the number of municipalities was nonetheless a remarkable change in the history of local government in Japan.

Table 2 The Number of Amalgamated Municipalities: 1999–2006

	April 1st, 1999–March 31st, 2005	April 1st, 2005–March 31st, 2006	Total
The number of municipal amalgamation	257	324	581
The number of municipalities involved	968	1,023	1,991
The decrease of municipalities	837	573	1,410

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (2004).

Merger and Local Democracy

The question may thus be asked: Did the massive amalgamation indicate a decline of local democracy in Japan? One may argue that, without regard to municipal amalgamation, most residents are less interested in local government in a material society (Nelson 2005). Due to rapid urbanization and IT revolution, there would be no need for people to interact with each other personally, while shared activities in the community would certainly drop (Putnam 2001). However, the political process of municipal amalgamation indicates that local democracy in Japan has never died.

Though much is not known, there have been hundreds of cases where amalgamation conferences simply did not reach to a conclusion or were altogether dissolved prior to the completion of amalgamation. It is thus worthwhile to note the reasons for failed cases. In the discussion of municipal amalgamation, the most important but difficult task is the consensus-building among community residents. Even though the Government emphasizes advantages of municipal amalgamation, it is difficult to persuade communities to abolish their local autonomy.

We shall look at the public opinion on municipal amalgamation. In Shiga Prefecture, prefectural government conducted an opinion survey on municipal amalgamation in 1998.²⁾ Tables 3, 4, and 5 contain figures (percentages) from the survey report. The survey results reveal different opinions of the community residents for amalgamation (Table 3). People who support the idea of amalgamation gave high priority to efficiency of government, better community development, service improvement, and land use (Table 4). Among the opinions against amalgamation, the “weakening relations between citizen and municipal office” was the primary reason with a score at 76.7% (Table 5). This suggests that many residents put faith in the existing local government units. It is worthwhile that the divided opinion on municipal amalgamation activates local democracy in every corner of Japan. It sometimes created a “divided government” at local level where, while the mayor proposed the merger, the local assembly opposed the mayor. In some cases, community residents initiated recall votes against the mayor who proposed amalgamation.

In the process of municipal merger, the first test is the establishment of “amalgamation conference.” A significant number of municipalities failed in organizing the conference due to difficulties to build consensus among stakeholders. In many cases, the local assemblies opposed amalgamation proposals. Therefore, in order to promote amalgamation in the “divided” communities, the Government introduced the residents’ initiative system in 1995. As mentioned, local residents can require the local government to take legislative action to establish amalgamation conference with signatures of at least 1/50th of the local electorate. By the end of 2006, a total of 385 initiatives had been presented throughout the nation. Of these, only 85 initiatives (22.1%) had led to the establishment of an amalgamation conference and 35 (9.1%) resulted in consolidation or merger. In the failed initiatives, 262 (68%) were ignored or rejected either by the mayors or local assemblies. It indicates that resident’s initiative on the amalgamation conference is not so much

Table 3 Public Opinion on Municipal Amalgamation in Shiga Prefecture (1998)

Positive	20.8%
Rather positive	20.7%
Rather negative	22.1%
Negative	18.6%
N.A.	17.7%

[Question: Are you for or against amalgamation if your municipality is going to consolidate or merge with other municipalities?]
Source: Shiga Prefecture Government (1998).

Table 4 Major Reasons “for” Municipal Merger in Shiga Prefecture (1998)

(%)

More efficiency in the government/reduction of cost	66.0
Better community development	55.6
Improving quality service	49.5
Appropriate land use	43.0
Large-scale public works	24.8
Improving living condition by urbanization	24.8

Source: Shiga Prefecture Government (1998)

Table 5 Major Reasons “against” Municipal Merger in Shiga Prefecture (1998)

(%)

Weakening relations between citizen and municipal office	76.7
Weakening attachment to home town	44.9
Inconvenience to access municipal office	43.7
Disadvantage of periphery in development	39.0
Deterioration of natural environment and life condition	26.2
Losing historical and cultural characteristics	23.8

Source: Shiga Prefecture Government (1998)

effective when mayors or local assemblies have difficulty to reach a consensus on the issue of amalgamation.³⁾

However, the establishment of the merger conference is just a starting point in the long process of municipal amalgamation. In making amalgamation plan, consolidation or merging municipalities should adjust the differences in the quality of municipal services, charges and fees, wage, etc. It can be a battle field for stakeholders. Even if the amalgamation conference could reach an agreement in the service adjustment, local residents may require the mayor to put it to a referendum vote.⁴⁾ As shown in the Table 6, a total of 305 referenda on the subject of municipal merger were conducted in the country by 2006. Among 305 referendum votes casts on merger, 10 votes were not counted.

Table 6 Result of Referendum Vote on Merger by 1999–2006

	Number	%
For Merger	175	57.4
Against Merger	120	39.3
No Count	10	3.3
Total	305	100

Source: Shichoson no Gappei ni kansuru Kenkyukai (2008), p. 15.

Table 7 Average Population and Size of Municipalities

	1954	1962	1999	2008
Total Number of Municipalities	9,895	3,466	3,232	1,784
- Cities	285	556	670	783
- Towns	1,970	1,963	1,994	808
- Villages	7,640	947	568	193
Average population	7,864	24,555	38,852	66,860
Average size of area	47.1 km ²	106.9 km ²	116.9 km ²	208.1 km ²

Source: Shichoson no Gappei ni kansuru Kenkyukai (2008), p. 2.

Accordingly, out of the balance of 295 votes, 175 voted in favor of amalgamation, while 120 voted against it. The figures suggest that a referendum was often used when municipal amalgamation was controversial. In any case, the conduct of a referendum was an indication of increased public's concern over municipal amalgamations.

Marginalization of Periphery

As shown in the Table 7, the average population of municipalities increased from 38,852 in 1999 to 66,860 in 2008. Accordingly, average size of the area expanded from 116.9 km² in 1999 to 208.1 km² in 2008.⁵⁾ In the enlarged municipalities, peripheral communities are suffering from the decline of local economy. People living distant from new municipal office feels isolated from the center. It should be remembered that the major reason against municipal amalgamation was the weakening relations between citizen and municipal office by amalgamation.

To mitigate a fear of marginalization after amalgamation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication introduced the new systems of "district councils" for the amalgamated municipalities. The district councils have two types - "district advisory commission (*Chiiki Shingikai*)" and "autonomous districts (*Chiiki Jichiku*)". The first one was introduced in the amendment of the Municipal Amalgamation Law in 1999. In the consolidated or merged municipality, the mayor may establish "district advisory commission" in each district with a limited term of years.⁶⁾ Major function of the advisory commission is to discuss important issues referred to it by the mayor. As a matter of fact, the district advisory committee is a substitution for previous local assemblies which were abolished after the amalgamation completed. The second one, the "autonomous district" system was introduced in 2004. The Government amended the Municipal Amalgamation Law and Local Autonomy Law to allow municipalities to establish autonomous districts. Each district is governed by district managers appointed by the mayor.⁷⁾ The existing municipalities may establish autonomous districts within their jurisdiction, but it is obvious that the national government expected the positive use of autonomous districts by municipalities under amalgamation. In the designation of the autonomous district the mayor

Table 8 Establishment of “District Councils” by Types (as of November, 2007)

Type	Number of municipalities
District Advisory Commission	217
Autonomous District (permanent)	17
Autonomous District (temporary)	38

*A total of the amalgamated municipalities is 564.

Source: Shichyoson no Gappei ni kansuru Kenkyukai (2008), p. 60.

should select either permanent or temporary organization. Table 8 shows the types of district councils and the number of municipalities that have introduced any of them as of 2007. It reveals that only eight percent of the amalgamated municipalities established the autonomous districts, while 38 percent of the amalgamated municipalities established district advisory commissions. However, advisory bodies do not work as expected. Members of the district councils feel it unsatisfactory because it is an advisory organ for the mayor. To make district councils work, it will be necessary to give more power to the communities. Active citizen participation in local governance revitalizes local government in a large territory (Berry et al. 1993; Diers 2004).

Conclusion

In the decade from 1995 to 2005, most of the municipalities in Japan faced a crisis of governance. The question was asked: “Which do you prefer, merger or bankruptcy?” With the enactment of the Omnibus Decentralization Law of 1999, the Government reduced its intervention in local policy-making and encouraged the voluntary amalgamation of municipalities through the amendment of Municipal Amalgamation Law. However, most local government units did not have a positive view on the consolidation or merger despite of a variety of benefits or “carrots” given by the Municipal Amalgamation Law. In 2001, the Government changed its strategy to a “stick” approach, that is, a major cut in the Local Allocation Tax Fund for municipalities. Under threats of bankruptcy, poor municipalities consolidated or merged pursuant to the proposals of prefectural governors. In the end, 1,410 municipalities disappeared and numerous new large municipalities came into being across Japan. In the amalgamated municipalities, mayors established new district councils in the territories prior to mergers to keep public trust on local government. However, citizen participation in the district councils remains low in most of the amalgamated municipalities.

It will be argued that a “top-down” bureaucratic nature of municipal amalgamation accelerates distrust in government among local residents in Japan. People who do not trust government tend to be indifferent to community governance. The so-called “bowling alone” phenomenon in community life seems to be pervasive all over Japan too. This may be another reason that explains the success of a massive municipal amalgamation in a short period of time. This is illustrative of a crisis of local governance in Japan.

On the other hand, municipal amalgamation gives a chance for those who wish to change traditional “village politics.” In the building of new municipalities after amalgamation, people can take action to make their community a better place to live in by organizing citizen groups. A model of “governing by network” (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004) can be adapted in a local government with multiple stakeholders.

Finally, public officials in the enlarged municipalities should recognize that the restoration of public trust in local governments can be achieved by improvement of citizen-centered service programs. It requires more bureaucratic responsiveness and professionalism to make local government workable in the age of new governance (Salzstein

1992; Meier and O'Toole 2006). Revitalization of declining periphery is hardly achieved by privatization of municipal services. In the provision of quality service in a larger territory, it is necessary for local bureaucracy to modernize its administrative capacity to deepen local democracy in the territory. It will pave a way to create new local governance and develop partnerships between center and periphery.

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Notes

- 1) In this paper the author uses the term "amalgamation" to designate a consolidation or merger. The term "merger" indicates the combining of two or more municipalities that results in the termination of all but one of the municipalities. "Merger" corresponds to "hen'nyu gappei" in Japanese. The term "consolidation" is a combining of two or more municipalities which results in the termination of each of the municipalities consolidated to create a new municipality. "Consolidation" corresponds to the Japanese "taito-gappei." As shown in the Table below, 79% of amalgamation is a "consolidation" type.

Types of Municipal Amalgamation (as of 2007)

Population Size	~9,999	10,000~ 49,999	50,000~ 99,999	100,000~ 199,999	200,000~ 299,000	300,000~ 499,9999	500,000~	Total
Consolidation	28	257	104	49	7	2	2	447
Merger	2	17	30	23	3	21	11	117
Total	30	274	134	72	10	23	13	566

Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs (2008).

- 2) Data collection methodology was as follows; Collection Method: postal mail. Population in the Survey: 8,000 adults. Extraction method: Stratified random sampling. Collection rate: 57.9 % (4,629 persons).
- 3) In 2002, the Government amended the Amalgamation Law to allow voters to directly call a referendum vote on the establishment of amalgamation conference via signature of 1/6 of the local electorate. It aims to bypass the resistance of local assembly members on the merger. However, the discussion in amalgamation conference is political and easy to be collapsed.
- 4) Under the Local Autonomy Law, a referendum is an "advisory" measure. However, local residents have adhered to the results of referenda since the mid 1990s. For example, in 1996, Maki Town, a rural community in Niigata Prefecture made a decision to reject a proposal for construction of a nuclear power plant within its territory pursuant to the outcome of a referendum on the matter. In the same year, the residents of Mitake Town of Gifu Prefecture voted in a referendum against construction of a hazard waste landfill in their area. Since then, the referendum has both inspired and influenced local politics in Japan.
- 5) Hiroshima Prefecture has achieved the biggest reduction in the number of municipalities in Japan. In 1999 there were 86 municipalities (13 cities, 67 towns, 6 villages). After the rush for amalgamation, the number of municipalities reduced to 23 (14 cities and 9 towns).
- 6) The terms and conditions of the district advisory commission are defined in the amalgamation agreement. In general, district advisory commission will exist for a term of 10 years. Commission members work without pay for a term of 4 years.
- 7) As this is a temporary measure for municipal amalgamation, it is usual practice that previous mayors are appointed as district managers.

