

Break away from a construction-obsessed government and utilize what we have

Why does the government continue spending on new public facilities? The reason is that government-issued bonds can only be used to fund the 3 areas of roads, buildings and parks.

In contrast to its name, the Japan Green Resources Agency has deforested mountain slopes and destroyed the environment to build roads. The Forest Ministry actually spends less than 3% of its budget on forestry development, with the remainder going to public works that put cement walls and steel piles into mountains. Of the man-made forests planted since 1945, almost 70 percent have not been thinned or weeded. While the prime minister talks loudly of the global warming issue as a key topic in the upcoming G8 summit in Doya Lake, in a clear contradiction, forests in Japan absorb less and less carbon dioxide due to excessive logging.

The same situation prevails with public day care services for the elderly, with the government providing generous aid only for the construction of new facilities. This is why new buildings crop up in the middle of paddy fields far from villages, unsuitable with the natural landscape.

In Japan, even welfare is a target for a government obsessed with public works projects, which is why national debt continues to rise at an alarming rate of 6.6 billion yen every hour to 1,000 trillion yen now. In the 5 years since 2001, when the government called for structural reform, national debt actually increased by one quarter to 250 trillion yen.

The population of Japan is about 10,000 times that of Yubari City. Multiply Yubari City's debt by 10,000 times and the figure is equal to the national debt. The financial collapse of Yubari city is not a story limited to sparsely-populated autonomies, but mirrors the country as a whole.

Amid this scenario, the many revolutionary measures I undertook in Shinshu-Nagano Prefecture, which increased budgets for both forestry management and thinning areas by 2.5 times, offer a clue to solving the problem.

During my tenure, shopping districts and vacant homes in villages were refurbished to provide joint daycare services for both the elderly and children aged up to 3 years old, with 300 such facilities set up in elementary school districts. As mentioned previously, central government funding is provided only for the construction of new buildings. Our original idea overcame various restrictions to provide welfare that spans across generations.

There is a need also to reform spending on public road works, for which nearly 60 percent of construction costs are assumed by the central government, but paving, maintenance and repair costs are shouldered by local governments. Rather than inviting financial collapse through endless construction, existing roads and facilities should be repaired to create a safe and secure future. A continuation of current policies will result in increasing accidents such tunnel/bridge collapses and road cave-ins. A change in mindset will truly pave the way to a "tomorrow of hope".