

Success Stories

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Okayama City: public and private sectors united for ESD

By Rika Usami

The city of Okayama, population 720,000, is located in Okayama Prefecture, some 700 km west of Tokyo. To get to this 790 sq km area from Japan's capital, it takes three and a half hours on the bullet train. Two large rivers from the northern mountains run through the city, and the reclaimed land along the Setonaikai or Seto Inland Sea coast is a major production centre for rice, vegetables and fruits. Spared natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquakes, and blessed with long hours of sunlight, Okayama City is known as one of the most comfortable places to live in Japan. But the city offers more than an enjoyable lifestyle; it is also a world leader in the promotion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).



© Okayama ESD Promotion Commission

In 2016, the Okayama ESD Project promoted in Okayama City received the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development. The project was recognized for its ‘whole city’ approach to ESD involving schools, the government, corporations, NGOs and other civil society associations. More than 260 groups of citizens, from children to elderly people, have taken part so far, working day after day towards objectives that include environmental preservation, global understanding and disaster reduction. How did this “Okayama Model” come to life and spread so widely?

Mr Hirofumi Abe, 62, Vice-President of Okayama University and chairperson of the Okayama ESD Promotion Commission, explains:

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“Throughout Okayama City, we aim for a sustainable society by combining school education and practical activities in communities. In 2005, the project’s secretariat was headquartered at the city hall. Currently the ESD Promotion Division serves as the secretariat and fully supports the initiative, both in its financial and its human aspects. While activities by NGOs and others play critical roles, they alone cannot spread the vision far and wide. When the government became active to engage corporations, schools and civil

© Okayama Daisan Fujita Elementary School



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In Okayama City, ESD begins in elementary school. At the municipal Daisan Fujita Elementary School – the 2016 winner of the 7th Education for Sustainable Development Award for Elementary School – weekly ESD classes start in the third grade where the theme is: “Let’s find Fujita treasures”. Pupils spend a year visiting local farms and meeting with human “treasures”, elders with specialized knowledge of the local area. Fourth graders learn about global environment and garbage recycling under the theme “What is garbage?” while fifth graders study agriculture with the local JA or Japan

Agricultural Cooperative and actually take part in rice planting to explore the theme “Does Fujita need agriculture?” Sixth graders look beyond Japan to discover “What is happiness?” by working with the non-profit organization Heart of Gold, communicating with foreign schools via Skype and undertaking fund-raising activities.

The three elementary schools in the Fujita District share common themes, but teaching contents vary. Ms Mayumi



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Itakura, 49, who took the lead on ESD at one of the schools in 2009, says she has seen the impact in recent years. “Our children walk through the rice paddies to

come to school every morning, but before ESD classes, they seldom took an interest in what is grown there. The classes have substantially changed them. They have become interested in different kinds of rice and some even come to me to ask about how it is grown. One child became eager to take over a family farming business in the future.”

Ms. Itakura makes a point of connecting thought to concrete action. “At the end, we discuss ‘What can we do now?’ Last year, after learning about agriculture, one child suggested preparing a bento, or box lunch, with food grown locally in Fujita District. So we asked for help from students learning home economics at a nearby high school and together we prepared bentos using local products.”



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In addition, they designed a poster representing “Agriculture Boys” to be displayed at the JA, and made a commercial to pitch Fujita-grown rice. Children wrote the script and also appeared in the ad which Ms Itakura filmed and edited herself. The finished work was featured on the Okayama City website.

“When you can actually turn your ideas into reality, it gives you confidence. Once you learn something, it’s important to translate it into whatever action you can take,” says Ms Itakura.

Certain young students even work on ESD on a voluntary basis, rather than as part of the school curriculum. At the UNESCO-associated Okayama Ichinomiya High School, the UNESCO Club was founded 14 years ago. Its main activities involve learning about fair trade and selling fair trade products. Members interact with outside organizations and have participated in a fair trade event with AEON Retail Company Ltd., known for its active involvement in Creating Shared Value.

It was a UNESCO Club member, Ms Kinari Yamasaki, 18, who came up with the name of “Fururi” for a replaceable plastic umbrella designed by AEON Retail. She recalls: “Last year, a representative of AEON Retail came to the school to give a lecture on fair trade. During his talk, he

discussed a project to manufacture umbrellas in Cambodia, with a percentage of proceeds to be donated to the country. I had just returned from the UNESCO Cambodia study tour, and asked if there was anything I could do. That's how I came to be involved in the umbrella project."

Interested in international issues since her childhood and having learned that the UNESCO Conference would be held in Okayama in 2014, Ms Yamasaki enrolled in the Okayama Ichinomiya High School because it had a UNESCO Club. By volunteering to assist foreign guests, she was able to attend the entire conference. "I was deeply inspired to see that people of my generation were actively speaking up. I had opportunities to travel to many places outside Japan during high school, and now I would like to focus more on what is happening within Japan. Once in university, I would like to continue studying with a 'global' viewpoint," Ms Yamasaki says.

One feature of the "Okayama Model" is to have community learning centres (CLCs) called "Kominkans" also serving as hubs for ESD. The CLCs, originally set up for community development led by citizens, were encouraged and promoted by the state after the Second World War. At present, there are 37 community learning centres in Okayama City, one in each middle school district, with city officials assigned to each one. In 2007, in partnership with CLCs in other Asian countries, the "Kominkan Summit in Okayama – Community Development and Promoting ESD Development" was held and the Okayama Declaration was adopted defining the roles of Kominkans and CLCs. Since then, interaction with foreign CLCs has continued, and Kominkans in Okayama City have served as bridges to CLCs around the world.

Among many active Kominkans, the one in Kyoyama District is especially dedicated to ESD. Mr Mitsuyuki Ikeda, 57, Director of the ESD Promotion Council of the Kyoyama District of Okayama City, was born and



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grew up in this district. He was working as an environmental consultant some 20 years ago when the Kyoyama Kominkan was opened and he became involved in it.

"We work on ESD in order to build a sustainable society. It is therefore important to realize the vision, not merely to learn about it. It is essential for local citizens and the government to work as one," says Mr Ikeda.

The current challenge is to develop future leaders. More people are now involved in ESD, but the initiative is "unsustainable" unless it has core leaders. To provide a solution, Mr Ikeda and others created a system of "Kyoyama ESD Fellowships" ten years ago.

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Mitsuyuki Ikeda, Director of the ESD Promotion Council of the Kyoyama District of Okayama City

"We began awarding certificates for completing ESD courses. Our target is to produce 1,000 fellows per year within the Kyoyama District. That would make 5,000 in five years, meaning that out of the

District’s population of 25,000, 10 per cent would be certified as fellows in five years. When 10 per cent of the entire population change their attitude, they affect the entire society. That’s the ‘social revolution’ ESD aims for,” he said.

Doing what you can, however small, to build a sustainable society: embracing this spirit, Okayama City’s “whole city

approach” is successfully changing citizens and communities. If we can spread the “Okayama Model” worldwide, we may actually see the day when the entire planet is transformed.

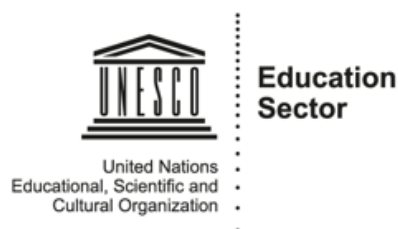
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UNESCO Education Sector

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