

Issues and Prospects for Policy Research in Local Governments

Akira Tamura

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1. Local Governments and Policy Capacity

A local government must be an entity that governs itself. The citizens are the ones who govern themselves, and they are also the ones who are governed. The term "citizen" here does not mean someone who lives in a particular city, but is a general term for people who are rooted in their local area and work together to build their community. Citizens are the ones who are the sovereigns of the nation, but local governments are places where they can exercise their sovereignty in a familiar setting. This is why they can put democracy into practice in a familiar setting through local governments. Local governments are said to be the mothers that nurture democracy.

Citizens create local governments to govern themselves. In English, a local government is a small governing body created by citizens within a specific region. "Self-government" means that citizens create a government democratically, and by feeling that it is their own, they can govern themselves and be governed. But being governed by a one-sided ruler, such as a "daimyo" (feudal lord), or by his underlings, such as a "daimyo's deputy", is not self-government. The first condition for self-government is that the government, as the governing body, is created by the citizens through means such as elections, and that they have a sense of ownership and that it is run through democratic procedures. The first condition is the starting line for self-government, but it is not enough to govern oneself. Furthermore, they must create and implement the rules necessary for citizens to live together, and provide the projects and services necessary for communal living. They must also secure the necessary funds and determine how the costs will be shared. What should be prioritized and how it should be done will differ depending on the circumstances of each local government, and cannot be done in a uniform way. Each local government must think for itself, make its own decisions, and take an action. This is the policy and implementation of local government. For local government to govern itself, the second condition is that it must have the ability to plan and implement the necessary policies. Local government can be judged on whether it has these two conditions. Conversely, if it lacks either of these two conditions, it is incomplete as a local government.

The first condition changed greatly with the advent of the new democratic constitution (1947) after World War II. Until then, it was too weak to be called self-government, but the so-called presidential system was adopted, in which the head of the local government was elected by direct vote of the residents, and the head was established as a representative of the citizens. In addition, residents can elect council members and commit to the operation of the government through a means called Direct petition (voters demand the assembly or chief executive to enact, revise or abolish local ordinances, perform audits, dissolve the assembly, or remove assembly members or the chief executive). Furthermore, since the latter half of the 1960s, there has been a call for citizen participation, and now, even without legislation, various forms of citizen participation have been realized.

There are also many local governments that are actively promoting the disclosure of information. These are still in the early stages and there are many problems and areas for improvement, but at least on legal basis they have been established as democratic organizations, and their management is also starting to be realized. Local governments take a democratic stance towards citizens because the people's claims are chosen through direct elections, so the leaders have no choice but to look towards the residents.

However, when it comes to the second condition, even today, more than 40 years after the end of the War, the situation is still extremely inadequate. In fact, there are even those who say that local governments don't need policies. This is because the idea that the job of local governments is simply to accurately execute laws and regulations made at the central government level, and to correctly distribute budgets such as national subsidies according to central government standards, is still deeply rooted. Despite the pretense of local autonomy has been established, a majority of local government work is still constrained from the outside by agency-commissioned affairs and subsidies from the central government. Within local government, it was seen enough to handle routine affairs. The idea was that the national government makes policies, and local government is just an executing body.

We were also taught that the word “administration” means “enforcement of the law”. This is true of conventional, formulaic local administration, but it is not true of the meaning and substance of central government ministries. The central government's main task is to formulate policy. It must keep its antennae up to what is needed today, and formulate policies that are most suited to the times. Administration of the central government is the process of formulating legislation and budgets to implement policy. Since modern legislation becomes obsolete in the face of changing times, the central government's main task is to revise laws and create new policies. So why was local government seen as a mechanical execution of laws and regulations? In other words, the second condition of policy creation, which should be an important task of self-government, has hardly been fulfilled until now. As a result, the policies of the various central government ministries, which were divided into separate categories, were implemented in a uniform and mechanical way, and policies that fully reflected local conditions were not formulated. If local governments becoming truly autonomous, it is strongly desired that they can research, formulate and implement their own policies.

2. The flow of local government policy

Of course, this is not to say that there have not been any unique policies implemented by local governments in the past. Even in the pre-war Meiji period, when centralization was at its strongest, local governments' own policies were highly regarded. In 1907 and 1908, the Local Bureau of the Ministry of Interior compiled a book entitled “Local Management of Various Matters” that introduced the policies of independent towns and villages, and a book entitled “Local Self-Government Management” was also published, which introduced local government policies through photographs. It was hoped that prefectures and municipalities would be managed through their own wisdom, ingenuity and efforts. Although some of the content was passive, such as tax payments and the provision of military supplies, there were also many items with an original autonomous content. Measures such as parks, tree planting, water sources, drainage, erosion control, land reclamation, landfill, industrial development, school libraries, and waste incineration plants were carried out with the cooperation of residents, philanthropists, cooperatives, village heads, and others. Initially, the Meiji government, which had rejected local autonomy, changed its policy and tried to encourage these voluntary efforts and have them cooperate with the central government. Even though it was limited, it can be said that this period saw a spirit of self-reliance and self-supporting autonomy.

However, even this limited autonomy was rejected during the so-called state of emergency and wartime period of the Showa era. The central government imposed its will from the top down, controlling everything down to the very end of the system, from the central government to the prefectures, cities, towns, and villages, and refusing to recognize self-reliance or self-supporting autonomy.

After World War II, there was supposed to have been a major shift towards independent self-government, but at the time, with the rationing system in place and people struggling to get by, it was impossible to implement independent measures. As the times changed, the post-war measures were reviewed and the system was once again shifted towards a centralized system. However, this time, because the powerful Ministry of Interior was dismantled, each ministry independently implemented

policies for local governments in a fragmented manner, resulting in a vertical, uncoordinated system of administration. Local governments became divided and lost their independence.

After the post-war period of confusion, as Japan entered the period of rapid economic growth, each region underwent major changes. Large-scale industrial development, urban development, and the construction of roads and bridges transformed local communities. The days of simply doing what had been decided in a routine manner were over. New problems had to be dealt with. Around the end of the 1950s, citizens became more aware of the issues they faced, and there were movements to seek solutions from the leaders and local governments elected by the citizens.

The catalyst for this was the pollution caused by the uncontrolled development of industry and the problem of uncontrolled residential land development. At the time, there were almost no central government policies in place to prevent pollution or control residential land development. These issues led to serious problems for citizens, such as environmental pollution, the outbreak of pollution-related diseases, landslides, traffic congestion, and a shortage of schools and parks.

The local governments where these problems occurred could no longer wait for central government measures. They therefore enacted ordinances and development guidelines, concluded pollution prevention agreements, and carried out pioneering policy research and implementation by local governments to minimize environmental degradation.

Many of the various model projects that were taken up by government ministries and agencies from around the mid-1970s onwards were in fact already being carried out by local governments.

In this way, the planning and implementation of policies by local governments played a pioneering role in contrast to the slow-moving central government. Many of these projects were conceived as emergency measures to fill the gaps left by the central government's failure to act in time. In fact, the central government was unable to deal with specific problems that arose in local areas because it was taking a nationwide perspective, and it was slow to respond to urgent issues. Pollution control is a prime example of this, and although the central government eventually set up an Environment Agency and began to implement systematic measures, in the early days it was local governments that responded to strong requests from citizens and took emergency measures. However, rather than simply responding to the requests of citizens, they also conducted scientific surveys and research, and carried out the most advanced experiments and field surveys of the time. By persuading businesses using scientific logic, they could implement pioneering measures. These measures gained strong support from citizens and public opinion.

3. The Necessity of Local Government Policy

As we have seen, local governments finally drew up policies, which were gradually universalized, and finally led to the enactment of policies by the central government, including legislation. The pioneering, experimental and emergency evacuation policies implemented by local governments were evaluated, but the idea that policies should be implemented by the central government remained strong. So, in some cases, the central government's absorption of local government policies and turning them into national policies has led to the local governments' role being somewhat diminished, and the situation has reverted to the old vertical division of roles. Nevertheless, the fact that the possibility of local governments forming their own policies has been demonstrated is a major step forward, and it has given local governments more confidence. This is because the myth that policies are made only by the central government has been broken, and because local government officials who have been involved in policy research and policy formation have gained confidence and experience.

As we move forward from there, it has become clear that while there are some policies that can only be made at the central government level, there are also policy areas that can only be made at the local government level, or that are more effective when made at the local government level. Policy

formation is not the monopoly of central government ministries, and there are policy areas, policy issues and policy methods that are suited to central government ministries and local governments respectively. Nevertheless, it is impossible to change each ministry's confined benefits and its structure with their assigned tasks, and comprehensive policies should be possible only in local government. Urban and village development that protects and improves the local environment is also a policy that should naturally be led by local government.

The following four points are important points that show that policies are possible only in local government, although they are difficult for central government ministries.

(1) On-site nature

The greatest strength of local governments is their proximity to the scene of events. The problems on the ground are concrete and immediate, and they are intertwined with a great many other issues. Central government ministries are far removed from the scene of events, and because they are nationwide in scope, they formulate policies by abstracting information from different regions, but local governments can always address issues that are based on the reality of the situation by confronting concrete problems on the ground.

In today's ever-changing local communities, it is impossible to keep up with the situation with only abstract thinking from above, removed from the actual situation. It is precisely local governments, which are always faced with the actual situation, that can take on new issues and turn them into policies.

However, there is a problem with this approach. Local governments are so involved in the actual situation that they can sometimes become too caught up in it and lack objectivity. The difficulties of the situation are all too apparent, and this can lead to a desire to avoid the situation. This can lead to easy, short-term solutions and compromises, or an attempt to avoid responsibility. However, if we can add objective, scientific analysis to the facts of the situation with courage, it is possible to create effective policies that work.

(2) Regionality

The advantage of central government policy is that it is universal throughout the country. This is effective for systems that require a minimum level of national minimum standards or a nationwide network, but in an era like today, when unique regional policies are desired, the opposite is true: uniformity and lack of consideration for regional circumstances are a disadvantage. For creating specific cities and regions, policies must be formulated based on a full understanding of the actual situation in each region, considering the climate and history of each area. When doing this, it is impossible to create effective policies unless the local government is closely connected to the region.

(3) Citizenship

The first basic condition for self-government is whether citizens' self-government is being carried out in practice. Naturally, local government policies must also be carried out under citizens' self-government. Citizens' self-government policies should be formed through the formation of basic agreements among citizens, and through feedback with citizens through citizen participation and citizen debate.

It is impossible for central government ministries to provide feedback on policies in direct relation to citizens. If we are to seek citizenship and citizen autonomy, then inevitably policy formation must be carried out by local governments. With policies that are uniformly and passively imposed from the center, citizens' opinions are not heard, so there is no interaction, and it is difficult to feel a sense of affinity or trust in the policies. As citizens have a sense of love and pride in their local community, local governments must take the lead in formulating and implementing policies.

Citizenship does not simply mean listening to the needs of citizens and doing whatever the most vocal ones want. There are many cases where citizens' demands and wishes contradict each other. In addition to meeting citizens' demands, it is often necessary to impose increased burdens and obligations on

them. Simply pandering to citizens will not enable you to create effective policies with limited resources. Therefore, it is necessary to create rules for the entire citizenry, and to fully research the trade-offs involved in policy, rather than spreading out the contradictions, and to seek combinations and choices together with the citizens.

(4) Comprehensiveness

The reason why policies are irrational and contradictory for a region is because the policies are not related to each other and end up as separate, one-off policies. Local issues are inherently intertwined with many other problems. Unless they are solved from a long-term, comprehensive strategic perspective, they cannot be effectively addressed.

Policies are formulated in the central government by each ministry, bureau, and department, and then they are passed down to the local government on an individual basis. This has led to the development of sectionalism within local governments, and has caused each department to lose its flexibility, resulting in the inability to implement comprehensive, integrated administration.

The ministries and agencies of the central government were originally established through the process of specialization, and while they operate on a national level, it is inevitable that they will be divided into separate departments. In contrast, local governments, in terms of their proximity to the scene of action and their connection to the local citizens, cannot implement effective policies by limiting themselves to dealing with a single issue. There are always many issues involved. It is possible to consider comprehensive policies because they are limited to a specific region.

Until now, the necessity of comprehensiveness has always been called for, but it has not been realized. If it is a strongly vertically divided, centrally led system, it is only natural that it will be vertically divided. Only when local governments recover their autonomy based on citizen self-government can comprehensiveness be restored. Local governments are not just a collection of individual organizations, and their great significance lies in the fact that they can create comprehensive policies. In local governments that have become too large, it is difficult to maintain a sense of comprehensiveness due to the scale disadvantage. For this reason, local governments need to be of an appropriate size that does not become excessive, and if they become excessive, they need to be subdivided and made of an appropriate size, as in the case of the special wards of Tokyo.

4. The Role of Policy Research

As we have seen, local government policies are no longer simply a matter of waiting for central government policies to be implemented, but there is a growing need for local governments to take the initiative in formulating their own policies, and there are also policies that can only be implemented by local governments. Local government policies are no longer simply a matter of being at the forefront of central government policies, or being experimental or emergency measures, but there is a growing need for more advanced and comprehensive policies. Otherwise, it will not be possible to formulate comprehensive policies that are suited to the realities of the local area and that take into account the views of local citizens.

The responsibility of local governments to formulate policies will only increase. However, due to a lack of awareness and experience as policy makers, it cannot be said that they are fully equipped with the ability to formulate policies. For this reason, it is necessary to fully consider the effectiveness and side effects of the methods that can be considered for solving the problem, as well as what the problem is for the region and where the causes lie. As a prerequisite for formulating policies, policy research must first be carried out.

Policy is not just about dealing with the issues that have already become apparent. We also need to consider potential issues. We need to take an action now to prevent future problems. It is also necessary to actively implement policies for the future. Each region is constantly changing. We need to identify

the forces and trends that are changing, and seek to create better regions for the future. Policy research will also be necessary to consider this future potential.

Measures taken without such calm, objective policy research will remain as “countermeasures”, even if they are effective for a time. Even if they are countermeasures, a certain amount of policy research will be necessary. They may be a temporary stopgap measure. Emergency measures and countermeasures often remain within the individual departments of a vertically segmented organization. There are many obstacles to comprehensive policies that transcend departmental boundaries, but first, these barriers can be broken down by conducting policy research. This is because, unlike implementation, it is possible to form relatively horizontally segmented teams in the research stage. If this is possible, there is a high possibility of moving on to implementation next.

The on-the-spot nature that is supposed to be the strength of local governments often gets in the way of policy research. If you are too familiar with the situation on the ground and know too much about current laws and regulations, you become rigid about new solutions and it becomes difficult to break out of the current situation. So people who are strong on the ground say that research is unnecessary. However, this is far too short-sighted about the situation on the ground.

The strength of local governments is that, while standing on the microscopic facts of the actual situation, they can stand back and look at the situation from a bird's eye perspective. This is what we call policy research. Knowing the facts of the actual situation and standing back to look at the situation from a bird's eye perspective is completely different from standing in an abstract, conceptual bird's eye perspective without any connection to the actual situation. Even if the importance of fieldwork is recognized, it is necessary to have a policy research perspective to have a relationship with other things and a broad perspective. Furthermore, when we look at the field with a more concrete perspective, we can have a new perspective that is different from the rigid fieldwork perspective. In addition, it is also necessary to conduct micro-level policy research that is close to the field.

Research that stimulates both macro-level policy research from a bird's-eye view and micro-level policy research that is specific and close to the actual site is a new research method that neither central government ministries nor academics have been able to achieve. We need to see policies that are implemented in local governments.

The policies of local governments and the campaign promises of their leaders are not always the same thing. In the case of specific issues that have been contested through elections, this is not the case, but in general, campaign promises tend to be general and flowery, like election slogans. In addition, many of them are abstract, and there is little concrete backing for them. In the future, we should be able to use policies to make our arguments, but many of today's campaign promises are limited to the ideas and concepts of the individual leaders. Therefore, if we are to turn these promises into policies, it will be difficult to simply turn the promises into policies as they are. First, we must conduct policy research and fully consider the possibilities, methods, problems, and relationships with other policies.

5. Methods of Policy Research

Policy research by local governments has begun to take on various forms. The “Local Government Policy Exchange Meeting” held in Yokohama in October 1984 at the initiative of Kanagawa Prefecture is an indication of the growing interest in conducting policy research by local governments, and this is becoming the norm.

Policy research is something that leads to policy, but just because it doesn't lead to policy doesn't mean it's unnecessary. Even if it doesn't directly help with policy, there are things like preparing basic materials that should be researched as a premise, analyzing the situation, gathering specific information, researching methodologies, and so on, and examples of successful and unsuccessful policies can also be useful.

Also, if you try to conduct research to suit your needs abruptly, you will only be able to do so to a limited extent if you do not have the right people in place. By constantly conducting policy research, you will be able to make it useful in practical situations. It is also necessary to broaden the base of human resources and create an environment and atmosphere that allows this to happen.

The following are some methods for conducting policy research.

- (1) Research team formed by practical organizations and research project team
- (2) Research by research organizations outside and/or inside of practical bodies
- (3) Commissioned research
- (4) Joint research with local governments
- (5) Training research
- (6) Independent research

(1) This is carried out by setting up a team within a practical organization to implement policy, and is the most closely linked to practical implementation.

(2) It is research carried out by an organization specializing in research, either within or outside the local government, and is research that has a slightly different perspective from that of the general frontline units, and is therefore more objective.

(3) It is research commissioned to universities, private think tanks, etc. Recently, the number of think tanks and consultants of this type has increased, and they are playing a major role. When commissioning research, it is necessary for the local government to have a research manager or coordinator who can fully control the research according to the objectives.

(4) This is research into joint issues conducted by several local governments.

(5) This is carried out as part of training, but recently, it is something that can be linked to actual policies to some extent. Or, it is something that aims to develop human resources who can form policies.

(6) Independent research is the most wide-ranging and basic. The fact that independent research is carried out widely is probably an indication of the high quality and interest of local government employees. There are various types of independent research, including some that involve training and others that are purely independent, and some are carried out not only by staff members but also in collaboration with other researchers, other local government staff members and citizens. Although independent research is not aimed at directly forming policy, since specific materials exist everywhere, it is possible to discuss and criticize them from the most liberal standpoint, and in doing so, to touch on more essential issues than in organizational research. In addition, it is precisely these people with a strong sense of independence who should be at the heart of research that leads to the formulation of actual policies. Independent research that draws out the independence of such people is the most important thing. If individuals do not have independence, they will not be able to conduct policy research that leads to good policies, no matter what circumstances they are given.

People who are controlled too much by organizations from the outset will find it difficult to develop new independence. In addition, people who have a detailed, fixed memory of laws and ordinances without any independence have been called experienced government workers. It is of course important to be aware of such realities, but we must use this awareness to develop tools for the next policy. However, on the contrary, the human ability to be independent has been suppressed by laws and ordinances, and people who have lost their independence have been respected as experienced workers.

While organizational research that ultimately leads to practical local government policies is important, the veterans of conventional government are the least suited to new, independent local government policy research. Those who participate in policy research on various occasions and who have both the content and the ability to be independent will be the ones who will succeed in organizational research for local governments. In other words, those who question the fixed and rigid nature of organizations and have the freedom to do so will be the ones who can carry out policy research and implement policies based on new citizen autonomy.

6. Prospects and Conditions for Local Government Policy Research

As already mentioned, the fact that local governments are the main actors in policy is not based on interpretations of the constitution or laws or on formalities. The fact that there are people in each diverse region who are seriously considering their own region and working together to make it better will create regions with individuality and appeal. The emergence of many such regions would be far preferable to the existence of only passive local governments that would not move unless ordered to do so from the center, even when considering Japan as a whole. Excessive centralization will discourage local governments from taking an action and prevent them from making the most of their local strengths. Unmotivated investment that is only trying to extract money from the central government will not be effective, and it will also impoverish the national finances. Furthermore, even in the context of diversified international relations, independent regional citizen diplomacy will play an important role in positioning Japan within the international community.

For local governments to become the main players in policy-making, they need to do more than just make a lot of noise - they need to carry out steady policy research. When making this policy research possible and to make it fruitful, the following six conditions are necessary.

Firstly, there needs to be a basic attitude on the part of the local government. As I have already mentioned, this should be fully demonstrated by the local government, based on citizen self-government and with a sense of responsibility for the region. They must not be content with a system that is stuck in a rut and based on a centralized, vertical structure. To achieve this, the heads of local government, council members and local government employees must be aware of the need for local autonomy, but the attitude of the heads of local government is particularly important. Citizens should not be misled by empty promises or superficial projects, and should choose their demands based on whether the local government is taking a proactive stance.

Secondly, it is a system that enhances the policy-making capabilities of local governments and enables policy research. By demonstrating comprehensiveness, it is possible to create policies that make the most of regional characteristics, citizenship, and creativity. At present, it is inevitable that the vertical organizational structure is created in response to the individual policies of the central government ministries, but it is necessary to establish a comprehensive coordination system that can function horizontally. The planning and coordination department must be at the center of creating a new system as an organization that breaks down the vertical divisions and is created through the autonomy of local governments.

Thirdly, it is about pride and affection for the region. Every region has its own unique characteristics, and we must be proud of and have affection for these.

Fourth, you should not be confined to your own region, but instead have an open attitude and broaden your horizons by visiting and learning about many other regions, and develop a broad perspective. By learning about other places and being stimulated by them, you will only then be able to clearly understand your own position. You will come to understand the good points of your own region as well as its shortcomings. Policies cannot be created in a closed-off regional environment.

Fifth, it is the spirit of the people. You could call it motivation. We have seen examples of people with potential who join local governments but then sink into a rut. There must be a lively vitality flowing through the local government.

Sixth, they are people with rich emotions. Local government policies should not be dry, but should be created by people with rich sensibilities. No matter how excellent a policy may seem, it will not be able to move people's hearts or truly enrich the region if it is created by people who have forgotten tender affection for others, admiration for nature, and admiration for beauty.