A Benevolent Economic Community of People with Disabilities: 
A Way to Economic and Ecological Coexistence

Yoshiyuki Nagata
Coordinator, ESD Study Group for the Asia-Pacific Region

For a human character to reveal truly exceptional qualities, one must have the good fortune to be able to observe its performance over many years. If this performance is devoid of all egoism, if its guiding motive is unparalleled generosity, if it is absolutely certain that there is no thought of recompense and that, in addition, it has left its visible mark upon the earth, then there can be no mistake.


Along with politics and society, the type of economy one promotes is an important issue in the shaping of a sustainable society (UNESCO, 2002). No matter how wonderful an ideal is at the foundation of education to promote sustainability, the outcome will be limited if the broader economy fosters unsustainability.

One hardly needs to emphasize that market economies which generate social stratification are incompatible with a sustainable future. An appropriate economy for a sustainable society will take care of society’s weakest members and enable everyone to participate in productive activities. One can call this a “benevolent economy” in which welfare and economic activities coexist.

“Benevolent economy” is a phrase that is gaining recognition, even being mentioned at international conferences organized by UNESCO, the lead agency for ESD. However, when one sees the influence of globalization sweeping the world in recent years, one cannot help doubting whether we can truly implement something like a “benevolent economy” in our current situation. In the midst of the permeation of market economics based on the principle of the “law of the jungle,” many people probably cannot even imagine economies with a human face in which time flows slowly.

There is, however, a rare case of “appeasement” between welfare and economics that has been realized through efforts to avoid being swept up in the drift of the times. Kokoromi Gakuen, a community aiming for self-sufficiency and holding fast to a pace and surroundings on a human scale, established distance from the economic emphasis of society’s mainstream as Japanese society underwent rapid economic development following World War II.

The Birth of Kokoromi Gakuen

In a village in the suburbs of Ashikaga City in Tochigi Prefecture, there are 40,000 square meters of vineyards on which grapes are grown. On a slope of 38 degrees or more, grape vines as tall as adults grow at a severe incline in even rows reaching every corner. This landscape was born from one educator’s idea to “live together with children, focusing on work in the midst of the right amount of austerity.”

This person, Noboru Kawata, had been a teacher in a junior high school for special needs students, and the children he referred to were children with developmental disabilities. Kawata’s fifteen years of experience preparing 123 special needs children to go out into the

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1 Although one example, S. Shaeffer, the Director of the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, has emphasized a “benevolent market economy” as one important component of ESD. S. Shaeffer. “Education for Sustainable Development: If Not the Solution, At least a Start.” (Hokkaido International Symposium on Sustainable Development. Aug. 2006. pp.99-110; http://www.hokudai.ac.jp/huisd/)
world led him to feel that 20% of special needs graduates would not be made use of in the general society. By growing grapes, he felt, these children would be able to live using their own power, and would achieve extreme happiness through working hard together with their peers and doing something they liked.

Like today, welfare facilities for this population at the time centered on protection. However, Kawata’s imagination enabled him to reject the limitations of welfare activities even while accepting this protective role. He thought that it was important for everyone—even people with disabilities—to use their power to live to the fullest, and he created an independent community to make this possible. “So, how happy can a person be when he has grown fat on pleasures that he has not worked for?” said Kawata, reflecting on the school’s start. “We wanted to preserve just the right degree of austerity as an important part of what we were aiming for—a residential facility where everyone, including people with disabilities, can live with dignity.”

Based on this philosophy, Kawata and his staff opened three hectares of mountain land to farming every two years beginning in 1958. Kawata and a staff of nine built a handmade barracks and lived and ate together. In 1969, a facility that could house 30 was completed. Between children and teachers, there were 39 members of this small community, born as Kokoromi Gakuen. The children gathered there were those deemed to have developmental delays, autism, Down syndrome, mental disabilities, and other conditions, and the majority were those with severe disabilities that had been rejected by other facilities.

Kawata introduced cultivation of shiitake mushrooms and grapes because he thought that work that was simple and involved much repetition would be good for helping children with mental disabilities. Cultivation of shiitake mushrooms and grapes involves weeding and carrying the logs on which the mushrooms grow, and is good because there is simple work throughout the year. Obviously, it is not easy to do this work on such a severe slope. However, once the children began this work, they started changing. Children who could not be controlled at other facilities became skillful handlers of carts for hauling logs.

This being said, as a start-up, the prospects were not for smooth sailing. The price of farm products fluctuates based on the market. Grapes usually decline in price at harvest time, and thus it was hard to plan for a stable income. A common thought among farmers, therefore, was that if one was going to grow grapes anyway, it would be nice to try at some point to produce wine, which has a more stable price. At the school as well, there was a realization that the grapes were not generating income, and a decision was made to switch to wine-making. Thus, in 1980 those student guardians in agreement made an initial investment to establish the limited liability company Coco Farm Winery. This was in the school’s eleventh year.

There were steps forward and steps back, but the careful handiwork of the students bore fruit, and Coco Farm gradually produced wine that could be sold. In 1989, 30 years after ground was first broken on the mountainside, Coco Farm obtained vineyards in California’s Sonoma Valley. Coco Farm then invited Bruce Gutlove, a wine-making expert from the Sonoma Valley, to Coco Farm, and began experimentation to make wine suited to Japan.

In the vineyards and the distillery, work truly proceeds with an appropriate person for each job. Some people pick the grapes carefully from the vines, others operate the machine that inserts the corks in the bottles, and others make noise from the top of the mountain with empty cans and sticks to scare away the crows, natural enemies of the grapes. Each of these jobs requires patience and concentration, but the expressions on the faces of Coco Farm workers are full of confidence and spirit.
Above all, the heart-filled handiwork of the students is connected to delicious wine. In 2000, Coco Farm Winery became known throughout the country with the selection of one of its wines for the Kyushu-Okinawa Summit. At present, 130 people from ages 21 to 83 are engaged with pride in this wine-making, and the wine produced in the vineyards has reached 150,000 bottles per year.

**Harsh Labor with Optimism**

In the background of the Coco Farm experiment are the founder Kawata’s views of labor and of the community born through the bonds human beings form through labor. In this, one can catch a glimpse of his view of the harshness of living and of a certain kind of optimism towards life.

In our abundant modern society, Kawata feels that experiencing a certain degree of hardship is important. “I have observed that many parents are protective of children with special needs,” he says. “Out of a misplaced sense of pity, they steer their children away from activities, not realizing being overprotective keeps these children from developing their potential.” In his special education classes, he says he has “seen many children whose fingers are so soft and pudgy that they seem not to have any joints, and kids who can walk, but easily lose their balance even when walking on level ground.” For this very reason, Kawata selected a site with a steep slope which children would not be able to ascend if they didn’t grab the soil and had the vineyards and school buildings made by hand. As a result, in no time at all, the “soft and pudgy hands” became the “hands of laborers.”

Through harsh labor, mutual bonds of sympathy are created among the students at the school. “It is said that labor is a process that forms the heart and soul of the worker, as much as it creates a final product,” Kawata says. “The bond that emerges from helping one another overcome a seemingly insurmountable hardship is as strong as steel.”

In the case of people with disabilities, these bonds were even stronger. “In special needs education, we were looking at the foundations of education itself,” Kawata said. Kawata bases this point on his experience that, rather than view people without disabilities teaching those with disabilities, there are actually probably more things that people without disabilities can learn from people with disabilities. “Peers with disabilities who are working together have deep emotional bonds that are different from ours; even among those who can hardly do any labor, there is true sympathy and a meeting of hearts,” says Kawata. “The depth of the bonds among people with disabilities is on a whole different level than those among people without disabilities.”

What is deeply interesting is that together with his belief in the harshness of labor, Kawata practices a certain type of optimism. The “Kokoromi” of Kokoromi Gakuen was chosen to convey “experimentation,” or “Let’s all come together and try.” In the local dialect, the phrase “Yattembeh” means “experimentation” in this way. When the school was started, it was clear to everyone that numerous difficulties loomed ahead, but Kawata started the school with an approach as carefree as the expression “Yattembeh.”

If one looks back at the school’s experimentation over the course of a half century, one cannot help admiring the ever-present enterprising spirit under which new challenges were undertaken and the optimism to make the impossible possible. Based on this “Yattembeh spirit,” in 1995 students invited their parents and managed to form a 291-member group that traveled to California. Among the parents, it is said that there were many difficult cases, including one who had tried to commit suicide after killing her child. However, Kawata’s hope that parents might one day be glad their children had grown up with special needs was gradually being achieved.
A Benevolent Economy

One can say that a charitable spirit in which the haves give to the have-nots permeates the welfare activities of every country, including Japan. There is a tendency to think that people with disabilities cannot make the highest quality products and that profitability should not be considered in the case of welfare production facilities. However, Coco Farm’s wine is different. As a result of much trial and error under the guidance of wine-maker Bruce Gutlove, Coco Farm’s wine has achieved value in the marketplace and become a product that equals that of large companies.

As mentioned earlier, as a result of accumulated experiences over more than 40 years, the quality of the wine reached a point that it was chosen to be served at the dinner party of an international summit. Coco Farm wines are also able to compete in the general marketplace and actually are of high enough quality to have become one of Japan’s representative superior wines. However, Coco Farm does not follow the usual direction of market economics in seeking more fame and riches. This is its subtle charm.

As touched upon at the start of the paper, the economy of Coco Farm has a different basis than that of modern society which rests on making more, working faster, and generating greater efficiency. Kawata says, “It seems to me that we are pursuing maximum efficiency in everything, and shunting aside those who cannot keep up with the pace of others in the competitive labor force—which will not lead to human happiness.” Coco Farm’s wine-making is the polar opposite of pursuit of profit at the expense of humanity, and is economic activity that places humans at the center. In this way of thinking, the well-being of the laborers takes precedence over efficiency. In other words, sacrifices in the present for the sake of the future are not made, and each person’s “here and now” is given priority.

The average age of the middle school students who started at the school in the 1950s is now 49. Naturally, their capacity for labor has decreased as they have gained in years. The shiitake mushroom harvest which had once yielded 350,000 mushrooms, has declined to one-tenth the volume. To make the beds to yield good shiitake, one must walk up and down the slope of the mountain every day carrying the logs on which the mushrooms grow, and it is a fact that this kind of heavy labor cannot be performed as in the past. Nonetheless, the expressions of all the staff, beginning with the director of the winery, are warm-hearted.

One staff member said, “It is true that as the students have aged, their laboring capacities have declined, but the grape vines have grown big.” This comment hints at the importance of not opposing a cycle connected with Divine Providence. Another staff member said, “That’s okay if people are not able to perform heavy labor; there is definitely something at the school that the students should be doing at this moment.” At Coco Farm, one can say that human beings are not made to fit the economy, but that there is an “economy with a human face” being realized in which the economy is made to fit human beings.

This is a school that even has a parent who tried to kill her child and commit suicide. A half century after the opening of this school, the students have come close to living independent lives. The current dream is to create a room where the elderly parents of the students can come to live and the students can take care of them. At any time when the parents just want to take a rest, they can come and relax and be taken care of by the children. At the same time that the children can care for their parents on their deathbed, the children themselves can also come to a calm end. It would be good, therefore, if Kokoromi Gakuen were able to become a facility to take in families. Kawata’s dream gently expands.

As Karl Polanyi (1975) pointed out, the view that economic activities are embedded in societal forms has been a challenge for the globalized world. Such benign forms of economy as practiced at Kokoromi Gakuen give us hints for realizing a society with a human face.
Putting Hearts and Souls into All Things that are Finite in Their Lives

The experiment of Kokoromi Gakuen is an alternative that developed at a completely separate pace to the mainstream of Japanese society, one of few cases amidst the revitalization and rapid growth following World War II. The important point is probably that these economic activities represent a local and independent way of life in which comparative distance is established with the national level and the market. The village in which the winery is located has not been captured by the powerful magnetic fields of the nation and market, and has been cultivated as a uniquely public sphere that does not sacrifice the weakest members of society. It therefore raises the issue of what kind of economy is important in order for society to be sustainable. One can say that Kokoromi Gakuen demonstrates a concrete example of a benevolent economy at the community level that should be advocated to promote a sustainable society.

Even though the original students of Kokoromi Gakuen get older, their “Yattembeh” spirit never declines. After having worked to create a benevolent economic community, they have found a worthy new challenge in “greening” the environment.

“Pour the power of your whole body into that which will disappear.” This phrase is something that Kawata frequently says to the students. Every living thing will one day die and be no more. Encapsulated in these words is the idea that we, who share time and space with all of these living things, must nurture a life into which we pour our full power.

For a half century, Coco Farm has grown shiitake mushrooms and produced delicious wine. However, now that it has achieved a certain degree of stability, Kawata is thinking to turn his soul towards restoring the environment and preserving clean air and water.

This holds significant meaning in Japanese society, which has proceeded at full tilt down the road of high economic growth. It is not necessary to emphasize, but when the priority of development is on the economy, it is most difficult work to return the natural environment to its original state. Concerning that, Kawata had much to say:

> It is clear to me that one endeavor with disputable[sic] value is to nurse our soulless mountains back to health. Our forests, which have been abandoned in our rush to embrace greater efficiency and convenience, will require enormous work to restore. Many people talk about environmental protection and green practices, but what the forests need is people to go in and do what needs to be done. We have worked hard to cultivate shiitake mushrooms and grapes, and produce good wine. Now that these projects are on track, I would like to devote more effort to improving the environment, to work in the forests so that we can contribute to cleaner air and water. In addition to practical merits, I think we should willingly pour our energies into creating things of beauty, intangible as they may be. I am sure that the beautiful mountains and streams our kids are helping to restore will be ample testimony to the value and dignity of their lives, even after they are long done. (Kawata, 2004. p.135)

The school’s new experiment (“kokoromi” in Japanese) brings to mind the picture book *The Man Who Planted Trees* by Jean Giono, which has captivated readers in many

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3 Concerning the method of economic communities aimed at self-sufficient ways of life, an example of a study stating the unique perspective of circulation, diversity, and connectedness is Hiroshi Nakamura’s *Chiiki-Jiritsu no Keizai gaku (Economics for Regional Independence)* (Nippon Hyoron-sha, 1993).
countries. It is the story of Elzeard Bouffier who, for more than 30 years spanning two world wars, planted several million trees by himself in the wilderness in southern France, creating a forest. The central character of the story, through his steady tree planting, turned a barren plateau into a happy place. In the same way, the people of Kokoromi Gakuen earnestly cultivate grapes, preserving the natural environment in the area and trying to make it more beautiful. Someday the students Kawata calls “heaven-sent children,” may be referred to by the words Giono (1989, p.46) used to describe Bouffier-- “that old and unlearned peasant who was able to complete a work worthy of God.”

References

URLs
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