

Community-based survey report;

Yokoze Town, the challenge of small town at risk of disappearing

- Toward the best livable and the proudest town in Japan,

the future of the town can be changed -

Hiroyuki MATSUMOTO

Economic Research Department, Managing Director

Bugin Economic Research Institute, Ltd.

I. INTRODUCTION

On June 21st "Basic Policy of Overcoming Population Decline and Revitalizing Local Economies 2019" was approved by the cabinet, so finally an effort of regional revitalization will turn into phase II as "regional revitalization in Reiwa" from fiscal year 2020. Up until now some of us might thought that the achievements of the effort around the country are not much. However there is a diamond in Saitama-ken, even it's small, that is Yokoze Town.

Yokoze Town is in northwest side of Saitama-ken 70km far from Tokyo. Its population is about 8,200. It keeps decreasing from the peak in 1995. Then the town became "a town at risk of disappearing"; one of the buzzwords in 2014. Because of the sense of urgency, the mayor of the town started countermeasures. He took available resources -human resources, goods and equipment, financial resources and information (most of them were from Tokyo and surrounding areas) - to revitalize the town. Because inviting new enterprises was hard, he started one unique project. That is the platform of cooperating with public and private, so called "Yokolabo".

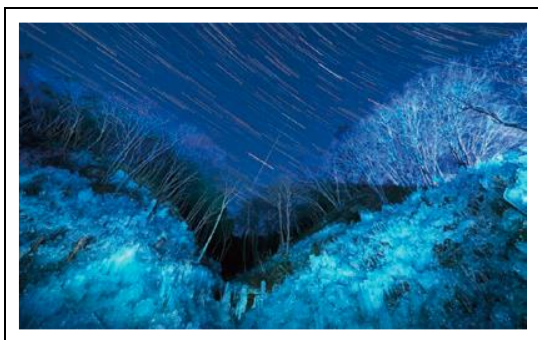
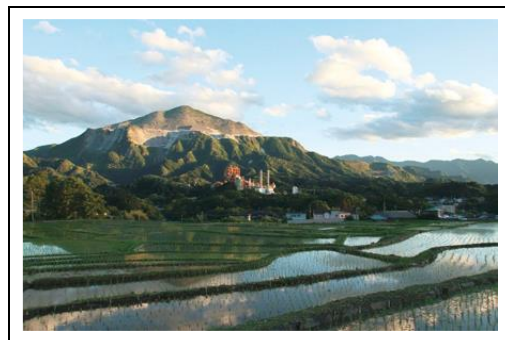
This is the consideration of efforts of regional revitalization with a focus on Yokolabo, including an interview of Mr. Yoshinari TOMITA, the mayor of Yokoze, as a community-based survey report.

II. PROFILE OF YOKOZE TOWN

It is located on edge of southeast side of Chichibu-basin, and is in foot of Mt.Buko which is rich in nature and a symbol of the town. The main industry is cement related industry because of good limestone mine from Mt.Buko. Recently, they make the best use of its beautiful nature and make much of tourism.

<Terasaka Step-like rice field>

The largest class of step-like rice field in Saitama Prefecture. We can enjoy the beauty of four seasons. Once they gave up cultivation but about 4ha(250 fields) were recovered.

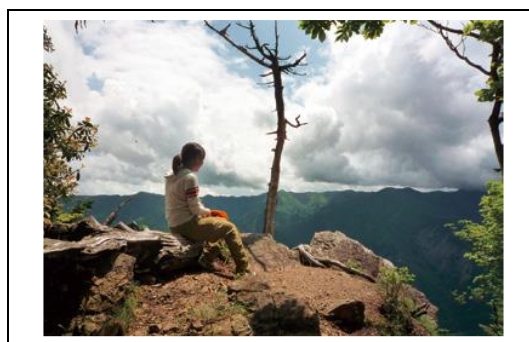


<Icicle of Ashigakubo>

We can enjoy the beautiful ice sight around the mountain more than 300m. Because of its harsh cold winter in Chichibu area.

<Amagoi-iwa in Mt. Oomochi>

It is certified as a power spot because of its powerful wind. It is also famous for a beautiful view from the mountain.



<Religious tour of 34 Temples in Chichibu>

Visiting a place of traditional temples is popular among not only elderly but also youth or foreigners. Yokoze Town has 6 temples out of 34.

III. “YOKOLABO” – PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP PLATFORM -

■ Achievement through 3 years and possibility for the future.

You may not be imagine what “Yokolabo” is. This is a nick name of public-private partnership platform of Yokoze Town. In Yokoze Town, they have started “laboratory to collaborate with Yokoze Town” as an effort to make the use of ideas from people and resources from the area to revitalize the community since September 2016.

Nowadays the mayor of the town or his staff are frequently requested to introduce their efforts in seminars. Here, I will overview the achievements through 3 years and consider a coordination with other measures related to regional empowerment of the town and possibility for the future.

■ “The crises we have now” Idea from the public are resource.

Yokolabo has started because of a sense of urgency of the mayor and staff to keep Yokoze Town survive. They are facing with a population decline and the town may disappear from a map of Japan, if they don’t take effective measures against it. To overcome the issue of the town “decline of vitality of the town by losing population” or “the limit of their own resources”, they sought ideas and resources from outside of the town. Yokolabo is the new mechanism that Yokoze Town in cooperation with its residents provide a stage to people who wanted to realize their idea. Because of the current positive move of regional revitalization, and its uniqueness, the initiative showed much achievements more than they expected.

Thanks to the things (human, goods, capital and information) from outside town, new vitality and positive reaction are found in the town. Also, it can be said that keeping town “open” is the key factor of success. As the third year, realizing the projects with ideas or resources from outside the town and its achievements call more ideas and peoples. Appearance of this flow was also good things they haven't expected.

■ Various projects: front runner without financial support

A project of Yokolabo will start if an idea from private companies, NPO or individuals who want to realize it with the town is accepted based on the evaluation committee. Planning and Finance division of the town are in charge of the initiative. The very important aspect of the selection are novelty and future prospect. These are according to the concept that “taking a lead to conduct new project in Yokoze Town that have never been challenged in other cities. ”. Also, they are checking a merit to people in the town and a passion of a proponent. Besides its unique point is that they doesn't set a field or theme in Yokolabo. They are keen on obtaining various ideas by keeping its door widely open. In those way they

promote a variety of projects which lead around the country. Human, goods, capital and information are flowing in constantly without cost.

■ First of all, make the town famous

Yokolabo project have performed well to improve the town's presence without using budget. The proponents can expand their idea and achievements with Yokoze Town to another local government. Yokolabo has been a good stage for people or groups who cannot take action in other local government though they have new ideas. Yokoze Town become famous through Yokolabo itself or its projects were taken up in media. Building a win-win relationship can maintain sustainability of Yokolabo. It's connected slowly but steadily to increase related population through the town has become famous.

■ Local government adjust their speed to the ones peoples and privates have and renewing its awareness.

Not only Yokolabo, difference of sense of each speed could be a barrier in progress of public-private partnership business. In that sense Yokoze Town increase their speed to match what the privates want by accepting and evaluating proposals every month. This affect positively around the local governments to renew its awareness and speed their works up.

■ Further leap and taking a new step

It seems that everything is going on well but there are some challenges for next step. Those are to visualize the project and to improve people's understanding. Because most project in Yokolabo are intangible not like inviting companies or building architecture, people in the town cannot see clearly.

Moreover, even if they say "public-private partnership platform", sometime it is hard to understand. So I recommend to let the people take part in to projects of Yokolabo to understand the achievement especially for senior citizens who don't use internet or SNS.

So far, they solicited wide range of proposals. From now on, to leap furthermore they need to think how to utilize Yokolabo more. For example, setting "free section" and "specified theme section" as categories of proposals is an idea to leach directly to the town's issues.

Recent “Yokolabo” main projects

■ Certification as “Doburoku* special district” (May, 2017 accepted)

Based in Law of Special Zones for Structural Reform, Yokoze Town was certified by the cabinet for the first time in Saitama prefecture as “Doburoku special district”. It means they can brew “sake” in all around the town even though its brewing is less than 6kl a year which is stipulated in liquor tax law. This is based on a Yokolabo project that was suggested by “Association of Soba** in Yokoze”, the producer group of soba in the town. This doburoku is made by Koshihikari rice which was cultivated in Terasaka terraced rice field in the town.

* Doburoku is a kind of Japanese sake. It is an alcoholic drink made in Japan. It is made with steamed rice, kōji, water, and yeast.

**Soba is a type of thin Japanese noodle. It is made from buckwheat flour. It is served either chilled with a dipping sauce, or in hot broth as a noodle soup.

■ Open and friendly space area 898 (May,2018 accepted)

This project was proposed by “MOSAS”, the group of young creators from Yokoze Town and Chichibu area. Once the town held hearing or workshop for regional revitalization, there were opinion which said “There is no public space to visit freely”, and “there is no place to listen to an opinion from the people” from many applicants from Tokyo. Then they start the project to utilize the public idle facility to create community space. Then renovation work was held by volunteers gathered with SNS and it finally opened.

■ “Wherever online consultation” by pediatrician (February,2018 accepted)

This is a project that anyone could ask easily to pediatrician with video call or talking in chat using free online communication app. There is no pediatrics in Yokoze Town so it can make up pediatric care in town and contribute to lower burden of families with small children.

■ Bus location application (May,2018 accepted)

This project introduced a bus location application experimentally to the community bus of Yokoze Town. New services of recognizing present location and operation status improve convenience of not only the people in town but also tourists.

List of representative projects

No	Name of the project	Overview	Type of proponents
1	Project for connecting future of food and agriculture	Selling fresh vegetables of the town by weight at retail store in Tokyo from the view point of food loss.	Private company
2	Watching each other project	Creating mechanism of watching elderly people using “investigation application” and “emergency contact sticker”.	Association
3	Kids work-study program in Chichibu	Parent-child participation type event which children can experience job.	Association
4	Project for making Yokoze Town as the best place for outdoor activities in Japan	Attracting family who like outdoor activities by using camping car.	Private company
5	Project for promoting measure against damage by wild animals	Strengthen harmful wildlife prevention / secure successors of hunting, connect to create tourism resources.	Individual person
6	Verification test for sharing service of electronic kickboard	Sharing electric kickboard for people in the town and tourists as new transportation.	Private company
7	“Magokoro Post” heartwarming digital posting	Introduction of digital letter to connect family and grandparents living far from.	Individual person
8	Community development by utilizing of Japanese traditional houses	Using old house in town as tourism resources.	Voluntary group
9	Active intestines project	Let junior high school students drink lactic acid drinks constantly to raise health awareness.	Private company
10	Project for experience agriculture and staying farmhouse	Providing agricultural experience and staying at farmhouse as paid membership system.	Private company

IV. INTERVIEW OF MR. YOSHINARI TOMITA, THE MAYOR OF YOKOZE TOWN

Interviewer: Hiroyuki MATSUMOTO

■ How did you feel when you returned to Yokoze Town in 2009?

<I felt I wanted to manage my declining hometown.>

I had worked at a bank for 20 years in my previous job, focusing mainly on bad debts and corporate rehabilitation toward the end of my time there. I saw various local cases in decline. I wanted to specifically manage a region where the population continued to decline and the economy was scaling down as a result. In particular, I wanted to do something about my hometown and decided to go back to Yokoze Town.

■ You were elected the mayor in 2015. How did you feel after the election?

<Appealing to the importance of thinking about crisis and hope for Yokoze Town together.>

To tell the truth, I also ran for the 2011 mayoral election, just before returning hometown. I had consistently insisted that we need to have policies against population decline.

However, I lost the election in 2011. Probably because it was too early to spread my concern into the people in Yokoze. I think it took four years for the townspeople to understand myself and my mind. I guess the reason why I was elected in the 2015 election is because the people in the Yokoze Town agreed with the possibility of future population crisis here.

What I would like to tell the people in Yokoze Town is not only about the population crisis, but also the hope that we can manage the problem. The solution cannot be realized if even crisis or hope are lacking. Furthermore, I think it is essential to share the hope and the mentioned crisis of Yokoze Town in order to get as many people as possible to support this initiative.

There is hope because Yokoze Town is a town with great potential, even though the population continues to decline. First, Yokoze Town is filled in rich nature. The landscape is beautiful and surrounded by magnificent mountains in the countryside. Second, is the people. The local community is well developed, and the residents have a high social interest. Third, is ease of access. While Yokoze Town is located in the beautiful countryside, it is still near the city including Tokyo.

I assume that there are few areas that have all these three points. These are Yokoze Town's great asset. In addition, Yokoze Town is a small town. Although there are several drawbacks to small towns, there are plenty of benefits. We are able to move fast, easily align the course of action, and respond quickly. Therefore, I appealed to the locals that this town would surely improve and revitalize if we shared the importance of thinking about the population crisis and implemented a policy that fully utilized town's strengths.

■ Could you introduce two or three major points in the “Yokoze Town Regional Revitalization Strategy?”

<Keyword : “addressing population decline”>

The Regional Revitalization Strategy involved all staff, including myself. We share with all involved parties that the primary theme of policy is to address population decline. The policies created by the Regional Revitalization Strategy are all related to the problem of population decline. There are two major points to this.

The first point is to control population decline. For example, we will increase the number of births and minimize the negative impact of social fluctuations.

The other is to prepare for population decline. I do not talk about increasing the population. I would like to moderate and stop the population decline.

For these points to work, it is necessary to prepare various policies on the premise that the population will decrease. I would like to make the town compact and balance it financially. All of this is included in the comprehensive Regional Revitalization Strategy. We aimed to make it possible for anyone to come and continuously attract “people, things, money, and information” from outside, and to revitalize Yokoze Town together with the resources in the town.

■ How about your impressions and achievements after the third anniversary of “Yokolabo”?

<Results were better than expected>

Looking back over the past three years, I think that Yokolabo has formed well. When we started, there was a project proposal a month, and we thought we would select two or three of them. However, we receive plenty of proposals these days. I believe that both the quality and quantity of proposals is improving.

The name of Yokolabo has been implemented, and the number of proposals from the local community has increased recently.

Although Yokolabo itself is a better development than we expected, I feel the understanding of what it is still insufficient to the residents. I think that elderly people especially do not understand the concept well because the results cannot be visualized and there are many foreign words in the project name.

<Speed of public-private partnership>

I consider that speed is crucial for promoting public-private partnerships. I think the biggest gap to be closed is the speed with which the public and private sectors work together. We wanted increase this speed to the same speed as the private sectors. On the other hand, it could be too fast to give residents a detailed explanation at times. Of course, there are a lot of

issues and points of reflection to consider. However, what I promised to the people is that “it will change the future of the town”, and “it will inevitably require a challenge to change the future”. I would like to continue to keep to the current speed.

Currently, more than 60 projects have been selected, but only 2 of them have used the available budget. The others were basically projects that did not cost the budget anything. For example, the town facilities were opened for free and events were jointly held. We provided a workforce and a venue, then related the town's creditworthiness and good name to the facilities. The public and private sectors work at the same speed in a win-win relationship here.

■ I would like to ask you about your expectations and future prospects for Yokolabo.
<Making it possible for anyone to come, and continuously attracting “people, things, money, and information” from outside>

It can be said that the reason why Yokolabo succeeded was not with the mechanism of “things” but with “contents” or “people”. Our new development has been expanding because “people” supported us. I believe that using the networks and connections we have made can be applied in many different ways, and I would like to challenge the town to do so. Yokolabo is not an end but a means: It is the cheapest and most efficient means to open a town and attract people, things, money, and information from outside.

As this current stage in Yokoze Town, it is important to invite many people to know Yokoze Town. For example, everyone knows Chichibu city, the main body of Chichibu area including Yokoze Town, but most people don't know Yokoze Town. Recently, thanks to Yokolabo, Yokoze Town became more popular. This project starts with getting people to know Yokoze Town because it is difficult to achieve anything without the town's name value. For example, to promote migration or to support entrepreneurship, the town must be familiar to those who want to practice these things. I think we can go to the next stage when it becomes more popular and more people visit Yokoze Town.

<Yokolabo for “Risk Management”>

I think that the essence of administration is risk management. This means we protect the residents from various risks.

I consider Yokolabo as a main risk management for the future. I think the risk of being unable to respond to the changing social trends is very high. I want to keep the information window open using Yokolabo.

<Create a visible economic cycle>

There are several challenges for Yokolabo. First, I think it is necessary to increase the meeting frequency for the town's own issues. To make the town open, we've implemented any kind of projects. While keeping this basic attitude, now I think it is better for us to focus more on local issues.

The other is to create a visible economic cycle. We ran this Yokolabo project for three years, with networks, connections and information being accumulated. I would like to create a new economic cycle using this model.

■ Finally, what message do you have for the townspeople.

<Toward the best livable and the proudest town in Japan>

I always think that the ultimate goal is to achieve "the best livable and the proudest town in Japan". The image of the town that we want to realize in the near future is expressed as a "colorful town" that is beautiful and abundantly happy. Due to the population declining, I would like to transfer the town into this image.

We also have a desire to keep our uniqueness while attracting various "people, things, money, and information" from outside. I hope there will be fulfilling lifestyles and abundant happiness in this town.

Finally, I want to create a "Yokoze Town brand". I trust that we can create this brand as "a town that is friendly and always attracts people", "a town that always has innovative movements" and "a town where there are many young people who try new challenges". We are able to change the future of the town. The past cannot be changed, but the future can be created by ourselves. I would like to move forward with the people of the town step by step.

V. YOKOZE PARTNER

■The Business Partnership with Musashino Bank

Yokoze Town, which promotes ‘making the best living town in Japan’ signed a ‘Strategic Cooperation Agreement for Development of Town’ with the Musashino Bank in June 2016, and worked on the development of various businesses in 15 fields.

It is not uncommon for financial institutions and local governments to form relationships and make agreements, but those with the word “Strategic” are rare.

The fields that they work on in collaborative agreements are: tourism promotion, education and sports promotion, community, life safety and security, and support for the elderly and disabled.

The Yokoze Branch of Musashino Bank has a ‘Yokoze Support Desk’ that arranges various consultations with the townspeople regarding town administration.

Yokoze Town welcomes Musashino Bank as a ‘partner for regional revitalization’, and the cooperation between Musashino Bank and Yokoze Town puts in place a ‘financial platform to support regional economic development within this region’. Therefore, they have a win-win relationship. Their ongoing projects have improved the status of Yokoze Town, so this partnership is far more than a ‘collaboration in name only’.

■Collaboration with Rikkyo University

Musashino Bank introduced Rikkyo University to Yokoze Town, and they started a collaboration in 2016. Various projects have been undertaken based on industrial collaboration projects with Rikkyo University since then.

‘Cafe 寺 s YOKOZE (Cafe Terrace Yokoze)’ was held as an event adopted by ‘Yokolabo’ in March 2018. Participants finished the reception at Seibu Railway Yokoze Station, and then went around the town from the 6th Fudasho Bokuunji temple to the 10th Fudasho Daijiji temple.

In addition, Chichibumeisen’s Haori (a short coat for Japanese traditional Kimono) and rental bicycles were rented, and each temple also served local specialty teas and food.

■Collaboration with the soccer team Omiya Ardija

Musashino Bank connected Yokoze Town and Omiya Ardija, one of Japan Professional Football League (J-League) teams in 2016. And the Omiya Ardija team have provided soccer coaching since then. Last year, the soccer coaching was conducted by the professional team coach of the Omiya Ardija team on October 28th, the same day as the “Yokoze Festival”.

Beginners and girls were welcomed, and 48 students from Yokoze Elementary School and Junior High School participated. There were four U-12 coaches from the Omiya Ardija team, acting as instructors, and two from Musashino Bank participated as support staff. It was a great opportunity for participants who were not usually in a position to take lessons directly from professional coaches. Their ongoing projects have improved the status of Yokoze Town, so this partnership is far more than a 'collaboration in name only'.

VI. CONSIDERATION

- To expand and strengthen the 'Related Population' by creating new communities -

How can we revive and revitalize a region with a declining birth rate and an aging population? Some local governments have been promoting their cities and improving their surroundings. As a result, the increase in the 'Resident Population' and the expansion of the 'Exchange Population' through tourism promotion have been highlighted. However, it is difficult for Yokoze Town, a small city that is relatively unknown alongside the possibility of disappearing with a population of less than 10,000. It is unrealistic to suddenly increase the exchange population or expand the resident population. This is a problem not only in Yokoze Town, but also in many regions nationwide.

The term 'Related Population' has recently come into use by both the government and media. The definition of the term 'Related Population' remains ambiguous. However, part of the term's definition, 'a person who is related to a certain region but lives outside of the region', is therefore established. Related population aims to build a network with local supporters. Local supporters are people who live outside the region but are involved in various ways as well as the solving of local problems with the locals.

The government does not regard the plan of increasing related population as just a pre-migration stage. Related population is after all a diverse concept now and the government would like to categorize it further in the future.

Based on the points previously mentioned, Yokolabo actively dispatched the information about Yokoze Town and their efforts. Therefore, they have increased the number of people who like Yokoze Town and can support them by getting to know Yokoze Town through various media and events. This was clearly an effective first step to expand the related population. Let us now discuss the expansion of related population.

1. Building a Related Population - Platform to connect people -

Yokolabo is not only a public-private partnership platform, but a platform that connects people as well. From the past results, it can be seen that Yokolabo has the following three elemental functions:

- Existence of a people who support personal connections
- Providing a place where people can easily gather
- Mechanisms to continually connect people

It is apparent that the synergistic effect produced by these factors have led to the past achievements and the expansion of the Related Population.

2. To expand and deepen the related population

- Expectations for regional change and the resulting ripple effects -

The essence of Yokolabo is the exchanges between the people of Yokoze Town and people outside the region, alongside the creation of a new community. Based on the ideas and resources of people outside the region, it is the creation of a community with townspeople that resonates with the values of Yokolabo. As a result of Yokolabo's efforts over the past three years, the creation of various new communities is expected. Furthermore, it is assumed to have a ripple effect on changes to the framework of local government, and the Related Population will be expanded and strengthened through continuous efforts.

Therefore, I summarized the ideas from the perspective of expanding and strengthening the Related Population and the future state of the local government.

Yokolab's Past Three Years

- Promoted awareness of local value through interaction between people inside and outside the region.
- Disseminated information on regional assets outside the region.
- People inside and outside the region connected to new people outside the region and spread awareness of new activities.

Yokolab's Future Prospects

- Contribute to the resolution of local issues, including people from the Related Population.
- Discover new local potential and rise to the challenges to change the future of the region.
- Change the related population to an "Active Population" in the region, and develop a new style of local administration.
- Change from the traditional 'Yokoze Town' to a new local government framework that incorporates various types of related populations such as locals, resident population, exchange population and active population.

3. Involve Related Population - Promotion in 'offensive' and 'defensive' policies -

As mentioned above, Yokolabo is a great tool for building related populations, and the results from the previous three years showed that it was greatly successful. The Yokolabo community is now looking forward to a new way of connection with region while finding new stage. Yokolabo creates a new community that unites 'people who want a stage to start something new' and 'people who can provide a stage because they want someone to start something new'. Yokolabo is a mechanism whereby people from both inside and outside the region become interested in Yokoze Town. The number of people who have a relationship with Yokoze Town will therefore hopefully continue to increase. Related population works as a foothold for an 'Active Population', such as exchange population and settlement population, as well as promoting community awakening.

Yokolabo is a great tool for building a sustainable Yokoze Town with two well-balanced aspects: The first aspect as a 'proactive' part is the new value creation for new businesses based on proposals from people outside the region. "The Yokoze brand" was created, making it 'the best livable and the proudest town in Japan'. The other aspect, as a 'passive' one, Yokolabo contributed to solving local problems and maintaining and improving people's daily lives. Using the power of a new community involving the related population, this leads to policy promotion with a good balance between proactive and passive policies.

4. Acknowledgments

This Regional Survey Report focused on the policies of a local government. The article was written in three parts: Interview with the chief; Introduction of policies; and Consideration.

I am grateful to Mayor Tomita who casually responded to interviews, Deputy Mayor Inoue who gave valuable feedback on the composition of this article, and Mr. Yamanaka from the Town Management Division who setup the interview. Finally, I would like to thank the townspeople who responded to the interview.

* This report is an English translation of the article which published in the "Bugin Report No.237" in Japanese.

About Musashino Bank and Bugin Economic Research Institute



Musashino Bank is the only regional bank whose operational base consists of Saitama Prefecture in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The prefecture lies immediately to the north of Tokyo, and many of its residents commute to work in the capital. Currently, 7.3 million (estimated) people live in Saitama, making it the country's fifth most populous prefecture after Tokyo, Kanagawa, Osaka, and Aichi, and the population is still climbing. Since its establishment in 1952, Musashino Bank has been one of Saitama Prefecture's core financial institutions, and has played a major role in supporting the development of the regional economy and local industries for over six decades. Bugin Economic Research Institute is the affiliated institute of Musashino Bank for research into the regional economy, consultation, information services, and holding of seminars.