



JRI news release

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**Promoting the Municipal Mergers
— Findings of a Survey on the Activities of
Voluntary Merger Councils & Study Groups**

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Overview

1. Introduction

The drive to municipal mergers in Japan is gathering momentum. Following on from the survey of legal merger councils implemented in 2000, a questionnaire about the activities of councils and study groups for the promotion of municipal merger, established on a voluntary basis, in 122 areas (as of May 2001) around Japan was conducted. The survey elicited 73 valid responses (response rate:

59.8%). A telephone interview survey was also carried out. The results were analyzed and compared with those of the survey of legal merger councils carried out in 2000.

2. Outline of the Results of the Survey

(1) Most voluntary merger councils and study groups have been established for less than 2 years. Some 71.2% of voluntary merger councils and study groups replied that it was "Less than 1 year" since they were established, and councils and study groups that had been in existence for less than 2 years accounted for 89.0% of the whole. Most voluntary merger councils and study groups had been established recently, since the consolidation drive had begun to gather momentum.

(2) Voluntary merger councils and study groups are interested in "information gathering"

In terms of information of interest in relation to the management of the council or study group, 69.9% of respondents cited "Information on precedent mergers" and 64.4% cited "Trends among other councils and study groups" (multiple responses allowed).

In the survey of legal merger councils carried out in 2000, the most commonly cited types of information were "Information on the mergers in the past" (52.6% of respondents), "Subsidy systems, etc." (52.6%) and "Activities of national and prefectural government" (52.6%). Thus, the demand for information on precedent mergers is high among both types of council, but whereas legal merger councils show a strong interest in systems relating to consolidation, activities of national and prefectural governments, which have supervisory powers, and other issues relating to actual consolidation activities, voluntary merger councils and study groups are more interested in gathering information at a more basic level.

(3) The most important issues are negotiation with other municipalities involved and relations with local residents

The difficulties in relation to their work most commonly perceived by voluntary merger councils and study groups were "Negotiation with other cities, towns or villages involved" (cited by 69.9% of respondents), "Ascertaining the views of local residents" (58.9%), and "Raising the awareness of local residents" (47.9%) (multiple responses allowed). The pattern is similar to that identified in the survey of legal merger councils in 2000, indicating that, although at different stages of the discussion, both types of body find negotiation with other municipalities and relations with local residents are the most important issues.

(4) Few councils or study groups are actively trying to involve local residents. However, most measures to promote participation in the argumentation by local residents were "Posting bulletins on the work of the council or study group in newsletters of the cities, towns and villages involved" (39.7%), "The council or study group has created its own newsletter" (31.5%) (multiple responses allowed). That indicates few councils are actively trying to involve local residents.

Moreover, 35.6% of respondents either had implemented no measures, were considering measures for the future, or made no response, suggesting that, overall, little is being done to involve local residents.

It is worth noting that a few councils and study groups (three, equivalent to 4.1%) were planning to hold referendum on the merger in the future. However, referendums depend on the maturity of discussion between local residents and councils will therefore need to be diligent in holding workshops, symposiums and councils with the participation of residents.

(5) Setting an expiry date for the Municipal Merger Law has gone some way towards promoting consolidation

In relation to the expiry date of March 2005 set for the Municipal Merger Law, the overall proportion of councils and study groups which expressed the view that consolidation should be implemented prior to the expiry date so as to take advantage of incentives was 86.3%, some 37.0% responding "definitely" and 49.3% "as far as possible". The pattern is virtually identical to that recorded in the survey of legal merger councils, suggesting that setting an expiry date for the Municipal Merger Law has gone some way towards promoting consolidation

(6) Councils and study groups need help in getting started with work towards consolidation

The most commonly cited request to central and prefectural governments was "Leadership in promoting consolidation" (38.4% of respondents), followed by "Aid in managing councils or study groups" (34.2%) and "Expansion and creation of incentives" (30.1%) (multiple responses allowed). The overall trend is similar to that revealed by the survey of legal merger councils. It is clear that voluntary merger councils and study groups would like central and prefectural governments to provide leadership in the process leading up to the discussion of consolidation.

3. Analysis and Proposals

(1) A tight schedule for discussion

Recent examples suggest that the process of consolidation takes 3-4 years from the establishment of a voluntary council to consolidation, and that the time taken to argumentation is growing longer. Given that the expiry of the Municipal Merger Law is now less than four years away, it is vital that those involved in the management of councils and study groups should work with those in central and

prefectural government to establish a framework that will promote an efficient and effective debate.

(2) The leadership expected of central and prefectural governments

Strong backup to bring municipalities involved into discussion is required in order to make the step up from research groups, whose activities do not extend beyond the sphere of informal discussion, to a formal discussion involving the managerial staff of city, town and village administrations and mayors. In future, central and prefectural governments should exercise greater leadership with a view to stepping up the consolidation discussion. Prefectural governments, in particular, having the closest links relationship with cities, towns and villages, should increase their financial and human support of council activities, subsidizing research costs, etc., taking account of local conditions.

(3) One highly effective measure would be an organization for communication between councils and study groups

Given the shortage of concrete information relating to the consolidation, it is easy to imagine that, for those involved in the management of councils and study groups, day-to-day management is largely a process of trial and error. Under these conditions, there is a need for the sharing of information, for example, through the creation of a nationwide organization for communication made up of representatives of voluntary merger councils, study groups, legal merger councils, and local governments with experience of mergers.

(4) The urgent need for disclosure of basic information on consolidation

Although ascertaining the views and raising the awareness of local residents is an issue for many councils and study groups, few have done more than publish

information in newsletters. While negotiations are still at the informal stage, it is difficult, in practice, to encourage active participation by local residents. However, in the debate over municipal mergers, the subject of argumentation tends to roam far and wide. Therefore it is important to make basic information on municipal merger available to local residents from an early stage and to develop an atmosphere that will allow discussion to go beyond general theory and focus on local needs.