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INTERVIEW

IN CONVERSATION WITH
SOICHIRO TAKASHIMA

A City Marked by Business Opportunity and Liveability

Soichiro Takashima, Mayor of Fukuoka, shares about the role of government in driving partnerships, and how he plans to make Fukuoka a leading city in Asia.



| Image: Fukuoka City



For Fukuoka City to continue to be a safe, secure, liveable and attractive city, partnerships are extremely important.



The Impetus for Partnerships

Given the increasingly complex challenges faced by cities today, why are partnerships even more critical and relevant?

Japan is facing a declining population and an ageing society with a declining birth rate. This makes it difficult to continue providing government services in the same manner as before. For cities to continue growing, we need to attract a diverse range of human resources and capital from around the world to create new businesses.

However, new services and products that help to solve social issues cannot be developed by the government alone, and there are many regulations in Japan that are unique to a mature nation.

I believe that, moving forward, our city administration will require greater effort to promote sustainable urban growth. This can be achieved by maximising the power of the private sector and other sectors through creating and reforming social systems and rules. For example, through relaxing administrative regulations in our partnerships with private companies, universities, local residents, and other parties.

The city of Fukuoka has taken great effort to maintain and enhance the liveability for residents. How important are partnerships in helping to progress liveability goals in Fukuoka City?

Currently, 96% of residents feel that Fukuoka City is easy to live in. The city has also been highly rated as easy to live and visit, in publications such as travel guidebook *Lonely Planet* and the *New York Times* in its "52 Places to Go in 2023" article. This is through the effort of Fukuoka citizens who have supported the development of the city over the years. For Fukuoka City to continue to be a safe, secure, liveable and attractive city, partnerships are extremely important.



PHOTO : Fumio Hashimoto

Ohori Park, Fukuoka.
Image: Fukuoka City

One such partnership is our regional strategy promotion council known as Fukuoka D.C. (FDC), which has attracted attention from the World Economic Forum. The FDC is a “think & do tank” for industry, academia, government and private businesses to collaboratively develop and promote regional strategies. Public-private partnership projects require great ideas, knowledge to incorporate those ideas into administrative plans, and a sense of speed. If any one of these aspects are not present, it will difficult to succeed. Hence, the FDC plays the important role of translating private-sector ideas into tangible administrative plans. For example, when the budget proposal for a project needs to be quickly approved by the city council, but the government is limited because it operates on a fiscal year basis, the FDC can step in to help drive the project at private sector speeds.

As for ideas, Fukuoka's unique characteristics as a compact city give us a distinct edge. The concentration of urban functions and interactions in one small area inevitably creates many interaction opportunities between business managers and entrepreneurs, which leads to frequent explosion of ideas.

By continuing to work with diverse entities such as the FDC, we can solve issues that are difficult for the government to tackle alone, and at the same time, maximise policy effectiveness.



Street Food in Fukuoka.
Image: Fukuoka City

Strategic Partnerships at Different Scales

How has the city leadership in Fukuoka leveraged strategic partnerships to develop innovative solutions for meeting complex urban challenges?

Needless to say, the spread of COVID-19 over the past few years created many challenges around the world. The responsibilities that cities bore across areas, from the health and safety of their residents to employment and education, were significant. At the beginning of the pandemic, when accelerating vaccination was a priority issue, Fukuoka City pushed for industry, academia and government to collaborate on workplace vaccination. Companies, universities, and other organisations in Fukuoka were the first in Japan to secure their own venues and medical personnel to administer vaccines at workplaces and other locations. As a result, Fukuoka achieved the highest vaccination rate among major cities in Japan.

Fukuoka City also works with the FDC to support companies with limited resources to create new services and products. Such efforts include coordinating with the local community, and encouraging companies to take on the challenge of social implementation. We are also working together to attract international financial functions by branding Fukuoka as an international city that is continuously innovating.

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For example, in September 2022, M-DAQ, a unicorn-class company from Singapore, opened its first branch in Japan in Fukuoka City. This was made possible through the efforts of Team Fukuoka, an industry-academia-government promotional organisation, aimed at attracting international financial functions. M-DAQ's business proposition is based on the idea that instead of having to exchange currency when travelling abroad, you can use their service to make electronic money payments with just your smartphone. We hope that Fukuoka will be a pioneer in developing new services that will create solutions for social issues, and that the entry of foreign companies will make Fukuoka a more viable option for overseas start-ups in the future.

What is the value in city-to-city level partnerships, and how can cities ensure positive outcomes from such partnerships?

From a global perspective, Fukuoka City was developed through more than 2,000 years of exchange with surrounding nations and the world. Today, it has established networks with cities globally in various forms. Through sister cities around the world, and through exchanges based on the characteristics and strengths of each city, we are working to revitalise our local economy and develop the next generation of globally-minded human resources.

For example, we have a sister city relationship with Bordeaux, France, and for 40 years, have enjoyed ongoing partnerships and exchanges at the private, academic and citizen levels. Leveraging Bordeaux's reputation for wine and Fukuoka's reputation for food, we have worked to establish a mutually benefitting partnership. We hope to support a small chateau in Bordeaux that makes fine wines, while at the same get more people to visit Fukuoka for wines that can only be enjoyed here. Currently, Fukuoka City is one of three cities in the world and the only city in Japan to have a wine bar accredited by the *Conseil Interprofessionnel du Vin de Bordeaux*. Such sister city arrangements are conducive for promoting global exchange among the youth who represent the future, as well as revitalising the local economy.

Fukuoka City has also been hosting the Asian-Pacific City Summit since 1994, bringing together leaders from cities around the Asia-Pacific region to promote Sustainable Development Goals through inter-city cooperation. Through this summit, sister and friendship city agreements have been concluded between Busan and Auckland, and Oita and Guangzhou.



Leaders from 32 cities across the Asia-Pacific region gathered in Fukuoka City for the 12th Asian Pacific City Summit.
Image: Fukuoka City

For the 13th Summit, which was held in 2022, international organisations, universities, businesses, and many other stakeholders hailing from 33 cities across 13 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, came together to discuss about urban development after COVID-19. The Summit provided a valuable opportunity for attendees to share about various challenges brought about by the pandemic, and to gather suggestions on policy formulation for overcoming the crisis, and what future direction to take.

Based on Fukuoka City's experience with city-to-city partnerships, what are some challenges faced, and how can these be overcome?

Under the framework of inter-city collaborations such as the Summit, I believe it is important to continue our ongoing and evolving discussions, and to share concretely about our initiatives and knowledge.

At the same time, it is also important to collaborate with a wider range of partners, not just cities, in order to achieve effective and specific actions. The Summit is attended not only by cities of the Asia-Pacific region, but also by Japanese governmental agencies, private companies, universities and international organisations such as UN-Habitat, the OECD and the World Bank.

In conjunction with the 13th Summit held online in 2022, Fukuoka City, UN-Habitat and Japan's Ministry of the Environment launched the Fukuoka Method Global Network (FMGN)—a learning platform to spread the waste landfill technique known as the Fukuoka Method. Developed by Fukuoka City and Fukuoka University, the Fukuoka Method has so far been introduced in 21 countries, mainly in Asia, and is helping to improve landfill sites and the surrounding environment by reducing methane gas emissions. Through the FMGN, we hope to continue promoting inter-city cooperation to solve carbon and waste problems faced by cities around the world.



Deployment of the Fukuoka Method to a waste landfill site.
Image: Fukuoka City



Through the Fukuoka method, the landfill site has been rapidly stabilised, and vegetation has begun to return.
Image: Fukuoka City



The government and citizens are partners in creating the future of communities.

We cooperate on an equal footing, while fulfilling our respective roles and responsibilities.



Could you share about some of the key partnership initiatives between the government and the people that have been introduced? What have you learnt here?

The government and citizens are partners in creating the future of communities. We cooperate on an equal footing, while fulfilling our respective roles and responsibilities.

Fukuoka City consists of 151 local communities across the city. The city provides subsidies and other support for local community activities in various fields such as crime prevention, disaster mitigation, child welfare, the environment and health promotion. In addition, the city holds a meeting for all local communities every year to present certificates of appreciation to those who have contributed to local activities, and to provide an opportunity to share examples of excellent efforts by each local community.

Crime prevention efforts are important for local residents to feel safe and secure in their daily lives. In Japan, it is not only the police organisations, but also the local communities that are engaged in crime prevention activities. For instance, in each community, local community members plan their own patrol routes based on their years of experience, and conduct crime prevention patrols when elementary and junior high school students head to and leave school. Recently, however, we started facing challenges such as the ageing of patrol leaders, and the difficulty in recruiting new members.

To tackle these problems, an experiment was started in some parts of the city last year, to create patrol routes using AI. Our aim was to improve patrol efficiency, while at the same time, make it easier for non-native residents, who may be less familiar with the city, to participate in crime prevention patrols.

This is an example of Fukuoka City working with residents and private companies on community-level initiatives. Through residents' on-the-ground knowledge and private companies' technological expertise, we hope to be better able to take on the challenge of solving local issues and social implementation together.

The Role of Government in Driving Partnerships

Fukuoka City is focused on developing the potential of hydrogen energy, and has launched hydrogen stations in the city. What is the role of government in initiating and leading partnerships to drive such innovative solutions to meet the strategic needs of the city?

Fukuoka City has been focusing on hydrogen energy for many years. We started with the Hydrogen Leader City Project, in collaboration with industry, academia, and government, which led to the opening of a world-first hydrogen station that produces hydrogen from sewage in 2015.

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In 2022, a new council was established with several private operators to jointly implement activities that promote the use of hydrogen. The council branded the station as a locally produced and consumed hydrogen station, and also collaborated with universities to conduct research into various aspects, including the reduction of costs.

Fukuoka City also signed a collaboration agreement with Toyota Motor Corporation on a wide range of initiatives that support the move towards hydrogen power. Such initiatives include the world's first mobile power generation and supply system, "Moving e". In addition, we are also planning to deploy hydrogen-powered vehicles for garbage collection and school lunch delivery.

The government will take the lead in developing and demonstrating technologies throughout the entire hydrogen supply chain, from production to transportation to usage. We are dedicated to the cause of creating carbon neutral societies in Japan and beyond, by showing the world a city that is sustainably run on hydrogen.

What is your view on the role of government in meaningfully sustaining partnerships, and how do you think this role will change in the future?

Our current environment is full of challenges, including COVID-19, soaring oil and commodity prices, climate change, declining birth rate and an ageing population. There is also pressure to build a more sustainable, diverse and inclusive society.



| A world-first hydrogen station that produces hydrogen from sewage.
 Image: Fukuoka City



The world's first mobile power generation and supply system, "Moving e".
Image: Fukuoka City

To this end, it will become increasingly important for us to think globally, but act locally together with various partners. I believe that the role of government should be to improve citizen services and community development by flexibly and speedily adopting new values, while keeping a firm grasp on the needs of citizens in this current age.

Do you have a vision of how the future of partnerships, in the context of urban development, should be like? How do you think it will unfold for Fukuoka City?

Fukuoka City has its sights set on becoming a leading city in Asia, defined by a harmony between people, the environment and urban vitality.

With a population of 1.63 million, our goal is not to become a mega-city like Tokyo, but a compact and vibrant city. We want to create an environment, which is conducive for taking on new challenges such as starting businesses, while at the same time easy to live in.

I believe that a sustainable society can be achieved if we work together with the business community, universities, citizens, and our partner cities around the world. Such an approach allows us to tackle issues from various angles, while working together towards a common goal as one unified society. We want to create a concrete and successful model in Fukuoka City that maximises the power of the private sector through various partnerships, while embracing changes in social systems and rules, including deregulation by the government. I hope that our example can be used as a reference around the world. 🗨️