Approaches to Social Innovations

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Social Innovation through a New Bond between People

Just a few moments ago, Dr. Ohashi mentioned that robustness will be required of systems that are evolving in complexity. It is my view that the same can be said for social innovations. Examples of this can actually be found close to home. For instance, at Keio Elementary School where I served as headmaster for several years, we had a meeting to discuss how we can better protect the safety of our pupils against possible malicious intruders into the school premises. This was immediately after the tragic incident in Ikeda City, Osaka where a knife wielding man entered an elementary school and a number of students fell victim to his rampage. Ideas such as "we should double or triple-lock the campus" or "we should issue ID cards to visitors" were put forward, but there were others who cautioned that "pupils may have difficulty evacuating in times of emergency" or "if visitors intentionally fail to return the ID cards when they leave, this will open up a whole new security risk," and we were unable to find a decisive solution at first. In the end, we wound up settling on very basic solutions, namely that "anyone who notices a suspicious outsider on campus should speak to that person" and "teachers should safeguard the lives of children even at the risk of their own safety." Perhaps this was a type of "robustness" that was being created.

When we hear the word "innovation," we tend to associate it with technological breakthroughs. But this alone is insufficient to bring about changes in society. I believe we are entering an age where "social innovation" and "human innovation" that takes into consideration new ways of bonding between people will be of utmost importance.

Ingenuity to Allow Innovations to Take Root in Society

The Cabinet Office of Japan has come forth with innovation objectives as part of "Innovation 25," their growth strategy encompassing a time span up to the year 2025. The official statement of Innovation 25 suggests that social innovation is needed in addition to scientific and technological innovation. I believe that in order to bring about social innovations, three criteria must be met. First, necessary changes must be applied to legal systems, administrative organizations and social systems in the public sector. Secondly, we must change the way individuals and groups operate in order to induce changes in their relationships in daily life. And thirdly, we need to implement a new cost defrayment or incentive system to make the social change sustainable. In the following, I would like to explain, in these three viewpoints, some of the projects that I have been involved in thus far.

Test Score Delivery, Telemedicine, and "City of Boods" Projects

In a joint project between Keio University and the Board of Education of a certain Prefecture, we developed a secure internet system to collect test results from each school, analyze the results, and to return the results to each pupil for the prefecture-wide standardized tests for all pupils at 3rd to 9th grades. It was a basic information sharing scheme - not something you'd call state-of-the-art system, but it was extremely effective and brought about an innovation to a conservative prone education system. Before this system it took several months to collect the data and only the average score of a school was given to each school. As a result, It is common that in educational communities, there exits a prevailing traditional mentality in which classes are evaluated based on impressional criteria such as "the sparkle in students' eyes." I am not disputing the importance of such factors, however, looking at data objectively make it possible for improving teaching methods, systems of communication among teachers among others.

Next is an example of an innovation in the field of telemedicine. It is a common notion that ICT should be effective in improving the sorry situation where a vicious cycle between the shortage of physicians in Japan and the anxiety felt by users prevails, but in reality ICT has spread very little in the field of telemedicine. One of the causes of this is the "myth" that good medical care can only be offered if the physician meets the patient face to face. It is needless to say that face to face contact is important in treating patients. However, it is a reality that doctors are not present in many of the rural less populated districts in Japan. Also, we have seen many cases where the user's physical condition has shown remarkable improvements when the physician and user "meet" and converse through a video phone on a regular basis. So even in urban areas, it may be that instead of users spending hours to reach the hospital, waiting for another hour to be called, and spending a mere 5 minutes with a doctor, video phone conversation over the internet could be more effective. I believe that it is crucial that we create a community model in which doctors and patients would build a trust relationship so that the vicious cycle would be lessened. Currently in the Co-Mobility project, we are engaged in an empirical test at town of Okuama in the western area of Tokyo, for the "telemedicine model for preventive medicine consultation system" jointly with NEC and other companies and organizations.

Lastly, there is an experimental project called the City of Books aiming for creation of a virtual symbiosis society. This project, which is being promoted as a part of the research at NICT, is based on applications of information technologies that are not necessarily more efficient but definitely more creative. It involves taking books which is mankind's accumulated knowledge, and placing them on a network categorized by their various connections in meanings to create a virtual "city," where people can freely search and associate to broaden their inspiration. We are developing a platform that enables knowledge to be edited and played with, through its ability to analyze and associate the contexts found in various information sources.

I would like to go into further detail regarding this matter during the panel discussion that will follow shortly.