

# SDGs as a Yardstick: Shiga-based Efforts to Be Expanded Internationally

In January 2017, the Shiga prefectural government declared its commitment to SDGs. Behind the declaration is Lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan, and the lives of local people. The following is an interview with Taizo Mikazuki, governor of Shiga.



Shiga Prefecture Governor  
Taizo Mikazuki  
Photo: Junichi Ota

**First of all, could you explain why you, as a local government body, are committed to SDGs?**

Shiga is one of the places in Japan where Buddhism was introduced very early. People in this area placed importance on the idea that Buddha inhabits the mountains, rivers, grass and trees. In medieval times, the merchants who were referred to as *Omishonin* (“Omi” is an old name of Shiga and “shonin” means merchant in Japanese) started traveling around the country and gave birth to the spirit of *sanpo-yoshi*. This means benefiting three different parties, which in this case include the seller, the buyer and the world. Considerations to users of water from the downstream of Lake Biwa also took root. Shiga has implemented welfare policies from an early stage. Furthermore, Shiga ranks top among the prefectures in Japan in the proportion of the number of *kodomo shokudo* to the total population. *Kodomo shokudo* is a restaurant for children where volunteers offer meals free of charge or at low prices.

In 2015, Shiga Prefecture included “a new kind of richness” in its basic initiative. This aims to encourage the local people to join the efforts to create a new kind of richness by reevaluating the spirit and philosophy rooted in Shiga and taking action accordingly. This new kind of richness can apply to anyone,

both now and in the future, and even to intangible things. This year, we have declared our participation in an effort to set specific goals and review our current lives and the state of our homeland Shiga in terms of our connection with the world and with the future. A yardstick for this is SDGs. Hopefully, we will be actively involved in SDGs by remaining aware of a perspective for the future and our connection with the world. This will nurture a new sense of mission among the people in Shiga.

In my view, a local government body is therefore an optimal unit for working on SDGs, and it must do so. It should be capable of effectively pursuing SDGs.

**In 1977, the people around the lake were united both publicly and privately in an effort to resolve the deterioration of water quality that arose from a red tide in Lake Biwa. It seems that this experience is utilized in your pursuit of SDGs.**

The spirit of SDGs sees the same future as the people in Shiga do. The large red tide in Lake Biwa occurred precisely forty years ago. The local people rose up together and formed a movement for stopping the red tide by using phosphorus-free soap instead of detergent. This led to the development of new products and the enforcement of a new ordinance.

We have a belief that we are “humbly allowed to keep” Lake Biwa, which is one of the world’s oldest lakes. About 14.5 million people in the neighboring prefectures drink and use the water from Lake Biwa. People in Shiga are traditionally humble and thoughtful in using the water from Lake Biwa. We would like to utilize this experience and idea more.

**■ The Act on Preservation and Regeneration of Lake Biwa was enforced in 2015. The Act may also have significance in pursuing SDGs.**

Yes, the significance is great. This means that the national law, not a prefectural ordinance, officially positioned Lake Biwa as a national asset. Lake Biwa is inhabited by more than sixty endemic species and turns into a wetland in winter where more than 100,000 waterfowl stay. The wetland was designated by the Ramsar Convention and is also important in terms of the ecosystem.

The enforcement led to a new initiative, a new era of Lake Biwa. Based on the respect for the will of our ancestors who cherished Lake Biwa, the new initiative aims at making the area around the lake more attractive through the utilization of Lake Biwa, strengthening the economic foundations in the area and making economic growth and environmental conservation compatible with each other so that no one will be left behind in society, as well as the pursuit of environmental conservation. Conflicts over water control may be found elsewhere. The enforcement of the Act, however, led to the establishment of an organization to hold discussions with the governments of the prefectures concerned. This will lead to meaningful efforts for the next generations. The world has seen numerous disputes over water consumption, including the issues of rivers that cross national borders. Globally sharing the experience of Shiga will lift our efforts and contribution to a new height.

**■ Tell us about the symposium held this past June on the sustainability efforts in Shiga and SDGs.**

Aimed at diffusing SDGs, the symposium was a great success, inviting panels from different communities including Mr. Thomas Gass, United Nations Assistant

Secretary-General. Behind the success lies cooperation from the enthusiastic business community in Shiga. They place importance on the spirit of sanpo-yoshi (benefiting three parties) in order to continue their business in the midst of rapid changes. For example, the Shiga Committee for Economic Development is setting forth a new principle for delivering a sustainable society, namely the addition of *asu-ni-yoshi* (benefiting tomorrow) to sanpo-yoshi. These ideas have strong affinity with SDGs.

In particular, Mr. Gass had a discussion with first-year junior high school students near the venue before the opening of the symposium. The pupils observed the discussion intently, who enthusiastically suggested that Mr. Gass imagine who made the clothes they wore and how these people lived.

**■ Developing the next generations is important.**

For example, a university in Shiga Prefecture is partnering with Keio University in the initiative titled Campus SDGs [see pp. 6-7]. In addition, more than 1,000 students from athletic societies at Ritsumeikan University Biwako-Kusatsu Campus gathered around Lake Biwa this summer and helped get rid of weeds of fertile and invasive foreign aquatic plants. They intend to establish the activity as a regular event. They are highly motivated to do something for the benefit of the environment, the future and the people around them. This makes me feel very happy and reassured.

It is meaningful for high school students, citizens and residents’ associations to pursue what they can do in accordance with the yardstick of SDGs. Shiga Prefecture would like to connect and facilitate these efforts.

In Shiga, we have made these efforts in our own unique way. Making these efforts more actively known from a global perspective and through expressions and performances could give birth to different involvements and chemical reactions or gain a diverse range of knowledge. As a result, the cooperation could be deepened. 

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Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA

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