

01/06/1997

Sharing 'one village, one product' vision

Padmaja Padman

MALAYSIA boleh? Well, Oita "can do".

In this spirit, the prefecture to the north-east of Kyushu island, Japan, has gone about the business of revitalising urban and village economies since 1979.

That year, Oita Governor Morihiko Hiramatsu had toured the prefecture which had just elected him to the post he has now held for three terms.

"I listened to the people. They had many complaints about de-population due to migration to capital cities, bad roads and low income," said the no-nonsense Hiramatsu.

He prescribed a cure that has been replicated in Japan's other prefectures, and in Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, China, Fiji, the US and Canada.

Strictly speaking, his "one village, one product" vision brings together individuals or families with a common business interest and capital in producing a specific product or selling a service.

In reality, the concept is flexible enough to be implemented on a "one village, three products" or "two villages, one product" scale, to optimise use of localised natural resources and expand business opportunities.

On some counts, though, there is no compromise. Hiramatsu said the product or service must be independently produced by the community, be representative of the locality involved, and meet global market standards.

In over 17 years, some 270 items have qualified for endorsement. At least 136 chalk up more than 100 million yen (RM2 million) in annual sales.

Oita is known as the "land of abundance", helped by a generally mild climate and diverse topography. This allows a range of food items to be harvested, from kabosu limes and shiitake mushrooms to prawns and scallops.

The ingenuity of residents has also led to the promotion of local assets like pearls, handicraft, historical monuments, cultural events, outdoor sports and hot springs.

Sometimes, ideas are snatched out of thin air. Yufuin, a town without a single cinema, now holds an annual film festival which draws noted Japanese personalities and is given wide publicity.

"The campaign encourages people to be self-reliant and creative. They must be capable of highly-motivated leadership to identify products and reinvigorate the community spirit," Hiramatsu said.

"No campaign will last long if it is organised on the initiative of the central or prefectural government."

The prefecture does, however, support the 11 cities and 57 towns and villages with technical training, research and development into refining or processing products, marketing promotions and specialised infrastructure.

One outcome of the campaign has been increasing per capital income within the prefecture, standing at US\$26,000 (RM64,000) currently. This compares favourably with America's per capita income of US\$24,000.

The central Government's economic planning agency placed Oita 12th out of Japan's 47 prefectures, and first in Kyushu, in a "quality of life" ranking. Indicators include housing, medical facilities and prices.

Another indirect benefit is human resource development through hands-on training at special schools that have turned out 800 graduates to date.

They provide the leadership for regional development.

Also significant by Hiramatsu's reckoning, is the growing friendship between Kyushu and Asian countries, as ideas and expertise are exchanged through participation in the campaign.

He obviously values "direct diplomacy" with national and local government leaders around the world, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who visited Oita in 1991.

The prefecture will make its presence felt in Kuala Lumpur in October, when the Oita Fair is held. In November, Oita will participate in the fourth annual Kyushu-Asia summit in Langkawi.

"In the years ahead, we want to promote inter-regional, rather than international, diplomacy through the One Village, One Product campaign and other development activities in agriculture or enterprise," Hiramatsu said.

Tertiary education will provide a test-bed for such co-operation, when the Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University campus is completed in Beppu City.

Work on the new facility will begin in the middle of this year. Oita prefecture will subsidise half of the construction cost of 30 billion yen.

Hiramatsu said the advisory council would include Dr Mahathir, Philippine President Fidel Ramos, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori and South Korean President Kim Young-sam.

In April 1999, the university will accept its first annual intake of 800 students, half from the region and the rest from Japan. It will offer four years of study in Asia-Pacific management and Asia-Pacific studies.

Yearly scholarships will be available to two-thirds of the students, funded by participating countries and by the business sector. A graduate school for 200 students will be established later.

The project aims to foster ties between Japan and Asia-Pacific countries, while training potential leaders to serve the region's public and private sectors, international agencies and non-governmental organisations.

(END)