As the G20 Global Smart Cities Alliance (GSCA) has launched its Policy Roadmap initiative on open data to which a broad spectrum of global cities (“Pioneer Cities”) have now participated, GSCA Japan hosted a panel discussion by inviting three panelists who are leading regional open data activities in Japan; Hiroichi Kawashima (University of Tsukuba), Isao Tada (Kakogawa City), and Misa Tokunaga (Code for Fukuoka). (c.f. Tsukuba, Kakogawa and Fukuoka are the members of GSCA Japan network)

Cities in the world see data ecosystem as the key enabler to the success of smart cities and are now updating their open data initiatives. This is also true for Japan where a steadily increasing number of cities are publishing open data and hosting hackathons while also facing challenge. This session explored what is needed and what will be the solutions so that such open data initiatives in Japan will further step up and serve as the basis for enriching and empowering regional smart city activities in Japan.

Key Messages

— Upgrading motivation and skills for open data publication and re-use should be enabled through focusing on real-life problems and solving them both from citizen side and city government side.
— It is the multi-stakeholder collaboration between regional government, citizens, businesses and academia, and also the cross-organizational/cross-sectoral leadership that enhance innovative culture, and at the same time, lead to the best practices in re-use of open data as a foundational public asset, thereby achieving inclusion of diverse range of residents.

— GSCA’s Policy Roadmap initiative (Model Policy) will serve as the catalyst to form common understanding across government departments and citizens and to promote self-directed commitment of relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, Japan highly acknowledges the learnings from global best practices of city members of GSCA network and is motivated to share success stories in near future that leverage Japan’s cultural background of moving toward collaborative and harmonized behaviors.

Summary of panel discussion

Where we are with respect to open data initiatives in Japan

Misa Tokunaga: Code for Fukuoka is closely communicating with Fukuoka City’s departments and asking for publication of necessary data based on realistic needs of citizens, such as visualization of playsets in parks for child-raising parents. I’m happy to see that Fukuoka City is basically cooperative to such inquiries. But, in the meantime, it is also true that it tends to be time consuming in coming up with approval to publish certain data sets.

Isao Tada: Kakogawa City has been working to publish increasing number of open datasets by gaining understanding of various City departments. We are publishing open data in the form of API and this has resulted in a rapid growth of number of access. Challenge is seen in how to know the needs for data and how to make such data available for publication.

Hiroichi Kawashima: I’m putting my own effort in solving region-specific problems via multi-stakeholder and co-creative approach. Out of my experience of “Hack my Tsukuba”, where the local academia is collaborating with Tsukuba City staffs, I am convinced that, in order to solve region-specific problems out of the effort of self-directed regional stakeholders, it is important
that people with diverse expertise exchange their knowledge and idea. Also, value creation from data re-use through innovative ideas often tends to call for solution building that approaches person-related information and this situation really requires “problem solving under the face-to-face human network”, which is indeed the way I am working as the leader of Regional Information Adviser (Japanese Government’s framework). I’m looking forward to introducing Japanese initiative to the global community.

Value of formulating Open Data policy

Misa Tokunaga: Activity of Code4 is derived from citizen’s perspective backed by a sense of ownership to real-life problems. The key attitude here, thus, is to drill down his/her problem in a self-driven way. And here is my expectation that articulating and sharing open data policy will nurture such a self-driven sense of ownership also in City government organizations.

Isao Tada: Trying to improve initiatives, including that for open data, in a city government often requires a really tough effort of interdepartmental adjustments. In that sense, having the GSCA model policy that is visible nationwide and globally is truly useful as my effort gets widely recognized within the organization. For something that cannot be accomplished by a single department, it is important to make colleagues following while making citizens involved. The GSCA’s activity is indeed what supports us and makes things happen.

Hiroichi Kawashima: It is certainly the important role of leaders to encourage a culture that enables cross-border innovation beyond boundaries of departments, organizations and sectors. I have a big expectation on the GSCA model policy. I want to see it connected with citizen’s initiatives to altogether provide a basis to build a solid and self-sustaining regional community by engaging a variety of stakeholders.

How to advance multi-stakeholder collaboration

Misa Tokunaga: Fortunately, Fukuoka City is cooperative to the Code4 activities as we represent citizen’s voices. The City may not be ready to immediately cooperate with a certain company but
they would listen to us well. Our recent collaboration example is the City and Code for Fukuoka that worked together to launch the regional COVID-19 countermeasure site. Our participation made it possible to integrate the form of citizen’s feedback into that open data site and this in turn advanced the awareness and understanding of citizens to open data.

Isao Tada: Kakogawa City recently launched a citizen-engagement platform called Decidim. A high school in our city started to work with us on this and now its students are trying to solve regional problems utilizing open data. Decidim also brought us an important finding that publication and announcements made by City often fail to be recognized by citizens indicating we should think more. Meanwhile, we started collaborating with businesses on data. Power company data is now used to improve nursery school’s operation and enable cost reduction.

Hiroichi Kawashima: People tend to count government, business and citizens as multi-stakeholders, but the impact of unique role played by academia should not be underrated. Furthermore, the benefit to students is also enormous, who have worked on utilizing open data. This is the best example of field level active-learning or problem-based learning where students had to logically convince the beneficiary of the value of the solution that they proposed. Indeed such an experience turns out to be quite useful after they graduate and join businesses.

Significance of government’s transparency

Isao Tada: In Japan, the purpose of open data initiative is often understood as efficiency enhancement of operations and creation of new business opportunities. However, the most important aspect of improving transparency of government should never be overlooked. Making operations transparent often makes its imperfections visible and voices of criticism will follow. Nevertheless, I believe it necessary to disclose data anyhow instead of causing a big delay in disclosure by paying too much attention on securing perfect correctness of data. This is about making a reset of government culture.
Hiroichji Kawashima: Open data is all about the right to be informed and Open by Default must be understood as the fundamental right of citizens. Today, in the digital age, government no longer has to use copying machine and putting paper into envelope and the cost of information disclosure has been reduced almost to zero. Therefore, the aforementioned fundamental right must be guaranteed and executed, thereby also securing the equity in the right of being informed for all citizens. Open data must be understood as the fundamental asset that visualizes various region-specific circumstances to benefit the well-being of all the citizens with diverse backgrounds and situations.

Open data and Smart Cities

Misa Tokunaga: Smart City is the effort made under a broad range of collaboration and is not something done by a single entity. And I believe that development of such a cross-sector collaboration will certainly drive open data publication into a positive direction also including publication of business-owned data.

Isao Tada: Kakogawa City’s smart city is not relying on the technology-first approach but the initiative is focused on solving real problems. The “watch-over” cameras, 1375 of them installed across the city area, have resulted in a dramatic reduction of crime incidents and are receiving almost unanimous support by citizens. Disclosure of such solid and quantitative outcomes in the form of open data in turn will develop a positive consensus to drive smart city initiatives in the city.

Hiroichi Kawashima: Making data open is not the biggest question. Collecting a variety of data itself becomes a strong message to citizens and encourages behavior change. Consequently, it will drive smart city and will lead to the total efficiency enhancement and/or optimum decision making. It is most important to anyhow re-use data without asking too much about open vs closed. Properly processed/aggregated personal data could be utilized as insightful information under restricted use and thereby will create a new value. And the outcome will gather attention and a better understanding on subtlety of data will be developed.

We should target a community where such a positive spiral will drive improved openness in data disclosure and re-use.
How to improve open data initiatives in Japan

Misa Tokunaga: Citizens should become more strongly aware of being the tax payers and speak loud to the city government about which sets of data are needed and should be published.

Isao Tada: Improving and managing data quality is currently beyond the capability of each operational department but the rate of improvement will boost as soon as the problem to be solved become sufficiently clear. I mean, narrative will drive progress. Meanwhile, municipal governments in Japan tend to quickly learn and follow good practices made in a frontrunner city as soon as they are made visible. It is also the reason that I have a big expectation to the network of GSCA and GSCA Japan.

Hiroichi Kawashima: Leaders should present clear vision that goes beyond department boundaries and also tell how data disclosure will lead to problem solving. Out my own experience it’s also important that cost for making migration/transition should not be imposed on each department’s existing budget but instead be allocated by leader’s decision. Talking about Japanese way, leveraging the people’s tendency of appreciating collaboration and harmonization would be useful, which may be said, for instance, like convincing people that virtue of disclosing data will in turn come back to you in the form of your future benefit.