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The Role of Farmers Market and Discussion Groups in Developing Agricultural Marketing System in Uchiko Town of Ehime Prefecture, Japan

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Abstract: The development of agricultural marketing systems is very important for the sustainable improvement of rural areas. In 1985, Uchiko town, experienced a decline in farmer numbers, therefore a Farmers Discussion Group was introduced to support those farmers who had given up farming. The group organized training opportunities and visits to abroad, introduced more cash crops and promoted tourism. Because of proper planning and diversification of enterprises Ishidatami-no-yado (rural hotel), a green tourism scheme, opened in 1994 to promote the products of Uchiko town. In 1996, the introduction of Uchiko Fresh Park Karari Ltd, which is responsible for handling, processing and direct sale of the local farmers products, further improved the performance of Uchiko agriculture. The Karari sales contributed about 13.6% of Uchiko town's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Consequently, agriculture production revived and raised the interest of farmers. This paper highlights the influence of the Farmers Discussion Group and importance of the farmers market in the marketing of agricultural products in Uchiko Town of Ehime Prefecture.

Key words: Marketing system, farmers meeting, Information technology

INTRODUCTION

Farm products were initially imported to Japan during 1963. Consequently it resulted in crises of domestic agriculture, forestry and fisheries. It was mainly due to decrease in self-sufficiency and the sudden fall in the prices. Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko town was organized to restore the confidence of farmers, renewing self-sufficiency and promoting farm villages in rural areas through educational institutions for managing the adverse circumstances.

The educational institution for the farmers, reliant on the farming business, was setup after the Mori Farmers meeting in 1985^[1]. While, Institute for Active Farmers in Miharu in the Fukushima Prefecture was started in 1984^[2]. Later these institutes were opened in many places in Japan for the young farmers in the farm village^[2]. Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko town applied the knowledge from these farm meetings after its inception in 1985. It is thought that Institute for Active Farmers in Miharu, Mori Farmers meeting and the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko, led to the concept of Village making cram school of the 21st century.

Kremen *et al.*^[3] reported that in USA, Farmers markets are a growing marketing tool for farmers where the

customers can take benefit of direct contact with the producers of their food. Similarly, Sakurai^[4] characterized farmers market and other farm village businesses as the communication between producers and buyers. He also pointed out the inefficiencies in the marketing of agricultural products in Chugoku area. Roth^[5] reported that the economic and social benefits of farmers market include rural revitalization, regeneration of a sense of community, reduction of economic risk to communities from the loss of farming.

Hiraishi *et al.*^[6] reported that the selection of information media and economic factors affect the spread of IT. In addition, Kikusawa^[7] highlighted the use of IT in the farmers market by a fact-finding survey and developed a basic database for sales. A great deal of effort has been made to analyses Farmers event and Farmers market in the development and activation of farm village. As a result, in 1985 the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko was established which became one of the longest surviving Farmers discussion groups in Japan. In most of the Farmers meeting held in Japan, they discuss various issues including budgets. Because of few items on the agenda, most Farmers meetings ended within a short period of time leading the way for policy reviews. The Farmers Discussion Group established in Uchiko town,

Ehime prefecture, initially discusses what environmental conditions are favorable by the farmers in an objective articulate the aspirations of the local people. After identifying these, the farmers participate in the meeting are able to develop and implement a plan of action for farm village renewal.

Karari farmers market was established in 1997 as part of an agro-forestry activation strategy in a sparsely populated hilly and mountainous area. Karari, which means open heart, was developed to have a successful agricultural market for selling specific local products.

The present study was initiated to see and analyze the development of the intellectual Farmers meeting and its impacts on the local community, introduction of green tourism (training in Europe), establishment of a farmers market (training in Oceania), influence of the intellectual Farmers meeting on the promotion of a farm village, changes brought about by the participation of female Farmers in Karari, effect of diversifying the agricultural products produced and IT management in Uchiko town.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted by a survey research, interviewing 50 members of the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko during 2002-2003. In addition, the policies and curriculum of the training offered, progress reports from 1985 to 2004 (published by Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko) were also referred^[8-23]. Training manuals^[21], Economic Reports by Uchiko town Office^[24,25] and Karari data^[26] were also analyzed in terms of sales performance.

Uchiko town has a population of 11,500 people occupying on 121.17 km² of land. Farmers account for 36% of the total households and farmland comprises 1,139 ha of the total land area, with an average cultivated area of 86 a. Agriculture practices centered on tobacco leaf and deciduous fruit trees and planted at sloping land and terraces^[24,25].

The town is located at 132°39'15" E and 33°32'46" N, 34 km southwest of Matsuyama city, Ehime Prefecture, in a predominantly hilly and mountainous area. It covers a total area of 120 km², of which 67% is forest and 12 and 13% are crop and paddy field, respectively. This area can therefore be classified as aging citizen and is facing depopulation. The urban area is about 6.6 km², which includes 4,500 individuals. Eighty percent of the farmers in this area are small-scale business farmers; about 2000 farmers growing tobacco leaf and deciduous fruit trees on the hillsides at an altitude between 100-400 m^[24,25].

In 1985, when the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko was established, the gross agriculture and forestry

production was 3.8 billion Japanese Yen (36,018,957 US\$). The production value in 2003 was about 2.8 billion Yen (26,540,284 US\$), a decrease of 1 billion Yen (9,478,673 US\$). It was mainly due to the decrease in value of tobacco leaf, rice and livestock^[24,25]. With the result, the depopulation escalated rapidly because of the import of farm products and the environmental degradation of farming areas in the surrounding areas; since farming was no longer ascendancy, younger generation moved to big cities seeking other opportunities.

During 2003, the income from persimmons, grapes, chestnuts, shiitake mushrooms and livestock was about 610, 200, 88, 126 and 383 million Yen (57,819,905/18,957,346/8,341,232/11,943,128/36,303,318 US\$), while the income from tobacco leaf decreased. A diversified method was adopted to develop a wide range of products^[24,25].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Development of the intellectual Farmers meeting and its impacts on local society: A steering committee was held responsible for running the affairs of Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko and influenced the local residents thought about their village. The committee was composed of a chairperson, secretary and around 10 members^[27]. Half of the members in the committee are female who have the right to vote. This is an example of the participation of female farmers in rural areas in Japan. As a result, females are able to actively and dynamically take part in the steering committee.

The role of the steering committee is to develop a training curriculum and nominate lecturers to deliver courses and ensure the quality of the course^[27]. The success of this committee has been an important factor in the accomplishment of the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko. Meetings are held five times a year, usually in January when the Farmers have more spare time and once in March^[8,23,28]. More than 100 courses have been conducted within the last 20 years. Furthermore, each meeting involves three lecturers; and more than 300 individuals have been involved. The participation fee is 500 Yen (4.7 US\$) and each course can recruit in average 50 participants; over the past 20 years, 5,000 individuals have participated. This ratio shows that one in every two individuals has participated in the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko.

After each open training meeting, a symposium is held in the following year. The theme of the symposium is what should you do to have a comfortable

life in a farming village? and the following issues are discussed:

- The importance of symbiosis with individuals from urban areas.
- The profits that can be raised using labor saving and part time employees even on a farm village scale.
- The importance of hobbies.
- The importance of environmental conditions in achieving a healthy family life.
- The importance of creating a dynamic rural community.

As a result of such meetings, the farmers have identified many ways that a happy life can even be achieved in farming areas. Moreover, they have also gained an understanding of the need for technical know-how.

Introduction of green tourism: Training in Europe: By considering the outcomes of the Farmers Discussion Group meetings of 1986 and 1987, it was exhibited that the members had an idea about livelihood in farm villages.

The fact that the modernization of agriculture requires production technology is now widely accepted. Due to the success of the farm village in Europe in preserving European culture, all members agreed to adopt a similar approach and use the farm village in Japan to preserve Japanese culture^[8]. The members also realized that farm village culture is quite different from that of city life and its maintenance is necessary. For example, Uchiko town was historically famous for a feature of Japanese Kabuki Theater called Uchikoza and based on this property a tourism resource was emerged. As regards green tourism, around 20 members took part in trainings and visited Germany, Netherlands and France. They experienced various aspects of European farms, for example, barns and fields and the production of butter and ham. In 1994, this training was followed in the "Ishidatami-no-yado" hotel plan, which was a green tourism scheme with stone paved roads. This plan became popular in the outside of the town and this was fairly useful for the life of Uchiko town.

Ishidatami-no-yado receives about 2200 guests per year and raises the town's income. The building itself is an 80-year-old house hotel, originally maintained by the town office and repaired accordingly. The dining room, bedroom, bathroom and living quarters are decorated in a modern style. The hotel can accommodate around 30 guests, however, due to its limited catering capacity and the desire to create a traditional farm-stay experience, this number is limited to 12 by the town office. Nine local female farmers are now in charge of maintaining the hotel;

therefore it also provides training for local Uchiko town women who are encouraged to participate. They are trained in hospitality manner that how to greet guests and serve them local dishes. This helps to develop various skills and increases awareness about the importance of local culture.

Establishment of a farmers market: training in Oceania: Oceania training was introduced during 1990-91 as part of the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko curriculum^[12]. Twenty-seven members including seven female farmers participated in this course in New Zealand and Australia to study the use of herbs in cooking, the sale of fresh vegetable and fruit, hotel management, welfare, etc. Additionally, they got the opinions and ideas of the local farming families.

The report of the above mentioned two visits to Europe and Oceania, which were sponsored by the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko, revealed that all participants, especially the women, felt they had broadened their knowledge in farming livelihood^[12]. They started to how the commodities are produced and also introduced added value products into their village; which gave the women a chance to develop their potential skills. They initiated developing the Uchiko herb industry as well as farm sightseeing tours, which mainly involved tours of the grape farms.

Influence of the farmers discussion group on the promotion of a farm village: The Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko has conducted the farm sightseeing tours. These sightseeing tours became popular and within ten years approximately 30 households became involved. Tours of grape farms especially; Muscat of Alexandria and Pione farming became famous. The production value of this green tourism was about 240 million Yen (22,748,815 US\$) in 1999 (Table 2).

In 1994, Farmers Discussion Group established *Uchinoko* market for local female farmers. Later on this market was known as Uchiko Fresh Park Karari Ltd. in 1996, which developed a direct selling of special local products such as persimmons, a primary industry of the town. In 2003, Karari sold products worth about 390 million Yen [36,966,825 US\$ (Table 3)]. As a result, the production of high quality fruits was promoted in Uchiko town and in 2003 the total sale of persimmons in the town was about 610 million Yen [57,819,905 US\$ (Table 1)].

The Uchiko town case study promoted similar meetings nationwide and various places have adopted such schemes. Mass media such as television, newspapers, magazines, etc played a key role in the development and success of these projects.

Table 1: Transition of amount of gross production of agriculture and forestry product in Uchiko

Division	1985 value of production (1000 JPY)	1990 value of production (1000 JPY)	1995 value of production (1000 JPY)	2000 value of production (1000 JPY)	2003 value of production (1000 JPY)
Field husbandry crops					
Rice	377,610	238,700	253,960	155,390	155,795
Wheat	8,974	5,304	1,846	377	322
Cereals	1,870				
Other cucumber	56,000	60,000	79,800	70,090	68,104
Vegetables	52,500	142,400	150,000	175,900	121,127
Strawberry		29,000	38,110	44,169	32,109
Soybean	14,905	4,700	1,760	1,827	1,221
Fruit tree					
Chestnut	183,000	101,500	112,000	100,233	88,014
Persimmon	354,500	428,350	434,460	449,056	609,116
mandarin orange	15,000				
Pear	25,000	12,600	22,320	35,179	45,933
Peach	5,000	6,300	13,500	23,790	36,879
Grape	70,000	168,000	189,000	210,560	74,202
Tourism grape					127,000
Yuzu orange	10,500	7,800	25,200	24,007	20,939
Kiwifruit		12,000	8,000	27,595	26,315
Other fruit	8,000	4,000	13,500	27,934	25,933
Minor products					
Tobacco leaf	1,724,172	1,350,238	1,415,233	842,052	801,200
Sericulture	18,000	15,200	5,121		
Shiitake mushroom	251,640	224,740	14,166	106,092	126,402
Flowering fern. dry.			917	4,581	4,223
Animal product					
Hog raising	352,800	230,230	169,200	135,200	168,315
Dairy farming			47,279	48,515	69,894
Dairy cattle	78,750	79,000			
Beef cattle	62,054	95,000	87,009	60,000	14,458
Poultry farming, egg collection.	52,640	1,850	78,000	107,082	94,198
Cultivation Pheasant		88,000	72,000	36,000	36,000
Forest industry and Seed and seedling					
Timber	49,500	102,515	71,277	57,533	55,686
Charcoal	2,916	10,000	9,500	462	567
Flowering trees and shrubs, floriculture	31,110	100,000	255,000	3,310	45,059
Nursery stock				44,630	
Variety for processing					
Labiata		6,000	5,000	207	419
Rape blossoms		12,000	9,800		
Kale					1,020
Total	3,806,441	3,535,427	3,714,958	3,791,764	2,850,450

Adapted from Uchiko Town^[24,25] and data from field survey 2004, 1US\$ = 106 JPY (Japanese Yen) 2004/11/13

Table 2: Transition of grape sightseeing farm production value, amount and area in Uchiko

Year	Value of production (1000 JPY)	Area (ha)	Amount of production (t)
1999	238,000	34	340
2000	171,600	33	264
2001	120,120	33	215
2002	128,000	33	230
2003	127,000	33	240

Source: Uchiko fresh park Karari^[29], 1US\$ = 106 JPY (Japanese Yen) 2004/11/13

Table 3: Transition of total sales in Karari, Monetary unit (JPY)

Year	Total sales	Number of shipper
1995	41,768,000	100
1996	70,801,000	147
1997	92,283,000	176
1998	144,085,000	194
1999	214,150,000	226
2000	252,160,000	226
2001	303,644,000	305
2001	339,600,000	334
2003	388,274,000	344

Source: Uchiko fresh park Karari^[26], 1US\$ = 106 JPY (Japanese Yen) 2004/11/13

Changes brought about by the participation of female farmers in karari:

The Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko uses the key phrase "A gentle Uchiko agriculture to the woman" and during 1992-93, an advanced study of the ideal ways to carry out agricultural practices was initiated^[13]. The involvement of women in the farm sightseeing tours and a plan for direct sale encouraged the participation of women. The town office advertised 169 of a total of 1,600 shares to the town's residents; however, the expectations were pretty high and 238 applicants applied for 455 shares. In the end, 177 residents were made shareholders.

The main crop of Uchiko town is tobacco, however, mulberries, bamboo and shiitake mushrooms are also important and diversification has resulted in multi-cropping of grapes, persimmons, strawberries, flowers, vegetables, herbs, etc.^[24,25]. Uchinoko market, which was promoted by the Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko, sold fresh fruit, flowers, herbs and vegetables by doing

Table 4: Sales total in Uchiko fresh park Karari in 1998, Monetary unit (JPY)

Commodity	Total sales	Rate (% of total sales)
Vegetables	35,544,250	25
Fruits	51,654,380	37
Processing food*	31,204,970	22
Flowers	14,327,590	10
Others	7,744,740	6
Total	140,475,930	100

*Processed foods, manufactured good etc., 1US\$ = 106 JPY (Japanese Yen) 2004/11/13

Source: Uchiko fresh park Karari^[26]

Table 5: Sales total in Uchiko fresh park Karari in 1996, Monetary unit (JPY)

Item	Total	Item	Total
Vegetables	28,635,300	Other Manufactured	
Processed food*	18,909,780	good	5,471,220
Grape	18,610,360	Herb	5,389,570
Flowers	14,327,590	Strawberry	4,398,900
Pear	13,917,980	Moti **	4,281,740
Peach	7,477,670	Chestnut	3,350,790
Persimmon	7,249,470	Pickle	2,596,230
Corn	6,908,950	Egg	1,239,180
Other fruits	5,687,150	Rice	1,088,340
Total	149,486,220		

*Including sales to trader, **Excluding snack and sweets

Source: Uchiko fresh park Karari^[26]

1US\$ = 106 JPY (Japanese Yen) 2004/11/13

Table 6: Domestic tobacco marketing trend in Japan, (100 million JPY)

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
JT domestic sales	2,501	2,431	2,372	2,290	2,183
Export sales	821	814	821	836	811
JT Total sales*	3,322	3,245	3,193	3,126	2,994

Source: TIOJ

*JT total sales before tax and excluding production from China

1US\$ = 106 JPY (Japanese Yen) 2004/11/13

Source: Japan Tobacco Inc.^[30]

Table 7: Smokers rate (%) in Japan (U %)

Gender	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Male	54.0	53.5	52.0	49.1	48.3
Female	14.5	13.7	14.7	14.0	13.6
Both	33.6	32.9	32.7	30.9	30.3

Source: Japan Tobacco Inc.^[31], Japan Tobacco Inc.^[30]

self-consumption, which remained unchanged up to the time of starting Karari in 1996. The Karari has 13 directors including two women.

Karari is open year round, except for New Year. When the women farmers live in Uchiko town, pay an annual membership fee of 2,000 Yen (18.6 US\$) and their farm products are shipped for free and sold in Karari. In addition, the processing of farm products is also possible at Karari. Karari is therefore partly owned by local residents as well as by the local government and private sector hence fall under third sector Farmers market.

Effect of diversifying the agricultural products produced in Uchiko town: After its establishment in 1994, Karari market earned 41 million Yen (3,886,256 US\$) in total sales

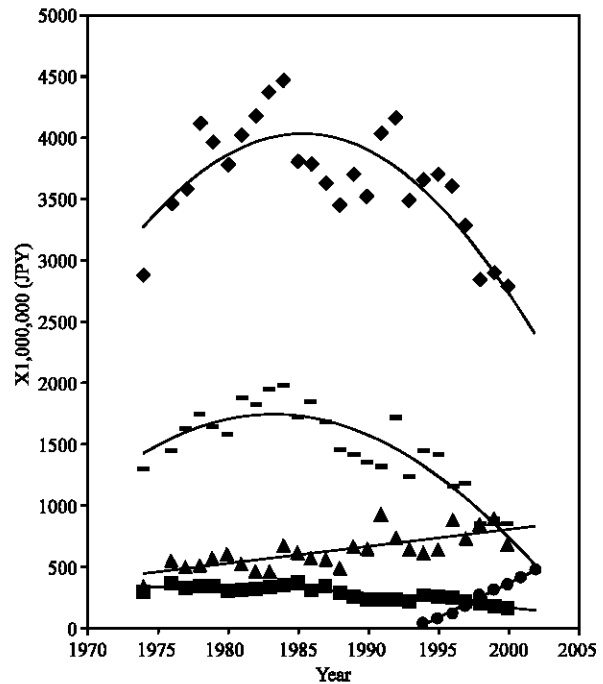


Fig. 1: Uchiko Town's gross production by type of enterprise
 ◆: Gross Production ($y = -5872.6x^2 + 2E+07x - 2E+10$, $R^2 = 0.6337$)
 ■: Tobacco ($y = -3587x^2 + 1E+07x - 1E+10$, $R^2 = 0.7943$)
 ▲: Fruits ($y = 38.35x^2 - 138448x + 1E+08$, $R^2 = 0.5631$)
 ■: Rice ($y = -323.58x^2 + 1E+06x - 1E+09$, $R^2 = 0.7926$)
 ○: Karari ($y = 459.61x^2 - 2E+06x + 2E+09$, $R^2 = 0.9919$)
 *Correlation between tobacco and gross production, $R=0.866$
 Source: Morimoto^[32]
 1US\$ = 106 JPY (2004/11/13)

in its first year. The number of members increased to 176 in 1997, consequently resulted in more than double sale of 92 million Yen (8,720,379 US\$) (Table 3).

While the gross domestic product of Uchiko town's agro-forestry industry was approximately 2,900 million Yen (274,881,517 US\$) in 2003 (Table 1), Karari sales brought in 388 million Yen (36,777,251 US\$) as mentioned in Table 3, which is 13.6% of Uchiko town's gross domestic product from agro-forestry. Karari is therefore an important new industry for the preservation of the next generation in Uchiko town. In 1998, fruits and vegetables accounted for 62% of the total sales in Karari (Table 4). Of the fruit sold in 1996, grapes, pears, peaches and persimmons were the most abundant as shown in Table 5. Of the goods sold in Karari, processed products, which include rice cakes, buckwheat, Udon noodles, Japanese sweets (Moti) and pickles, are also important (Table 5). For example, at 31,204,970 Yen (295,782 US\$), the processed foods accounted for 22% of the total sales in 1998 (Table 4), which is almost equal to the total sale of vegetables (35,544,250 Yen (336,912 US\$)). Overall, fresh fruits and processed goods account for 84% of the total sales in Karari and an important income source. Ten percent of Karari sales come from flower, which is a

new project for Uchiko town. Although Uchiko is far from the city, the production and sale of flowers has proved to be important thus helping restructure this sparsely populated district.

However, the anti-smoking campaign, which led to the establishment of non-smoking areas started in 2000 in Japan, resulted in a decreasing trend for both tobacco productions (Table 6) and smoking amounts (Table 7). Tobacco production is remarkably in the decreasing trend although it is the main industry in Uchiko town. Although the amount of the fruit production has increased, it has not been able to offset the decline in gross production due to decline in tobacco revenue (Fig. 1).

The introduction of Ishidatami-no-yado (a green tourism scheme, sightseeing business farms and the increasing total sales of vegetables, grapes, persimmons, pears, peaches, flowers and especially processed foods through Karari) has had a significant influence on the development of this rural farming area (Table 1).

Therefore it can be said that diversification of enterprises helped reducing the risk due to decline in sales of one enterprise.

IT management in Uchiko town: Uchinoko market was established in 1994 as a farmers market for selling local produce, training farmers and collecting data. As the volume of sale increased, the demand for information also increased. An IT maintenance system was initiated during 1995-96 and Karari market for special products was opened. The maintenance system developed provides a simple scheme, which allows even those unfamiliar with IT like senior citizens to quickly access sales information. Computers and fax machines were set up and allowed the farmers to have easy access to marketing information. Local Area Network has been established in Uchiko town enabling the farmers to be on network. IT in the Karari created an efficient marketing system and provided good communication links between producers and consumers. Producers can easily access sales data and predict the demand for various products. Weather reports for Uchiko town were also included in the new advanced system.

CONCLUSIONS

Karari has assisted local farmers in the marketing of their produce. This has been achieved through the provision of processing facilities and increased product sales. In addition, the introduction of Ishidatami-no-yado has opened the area for tourism and created a market for farm products. Direct marketing allows growers to redefine the entire marketing, price, placement (channel of distribution) and promotion. Within the context of direct

marketing, the producer has the benefit of dramatically increase the product quality, prices that are competitive with chain supermarkets.

The introduction of fresh fruits, flowers, processed foods, herbs and vegetables have boosted total sales in the area and Karari now contributes significantly to the gross domestic product of Uchiko town (13.6%). Processed foods have been especially important in Karari and it is strongly recommended that this kind of phenomenon be developed further in the reconstruction of agro-forestry in Uchiko town.

It is also concluded that Farmers Discussion Group in Uchiko was the central point in organizing the local farmers and creating such marketing system. Each farmer realizes that the key to the success of the Karari lies on his or her active participation. The farmers have been taught business management in order to become good managers. This has greatly influenced the management of Karari too. The discussion group has been successful for such a long time because of proper planning by the commissioners, the introduction of additional lucrative cash crops, training and diversification of farming enterprises. Green tourism, which was promoted by the discussion group, has also been introduced as a way of promoting Uchiko town and generating an additional income. What Farmers market offers is an avenue for agricultural entrepreneurship, in an arena that typically has high entry barriers. Direct marketing production tends to be smaller scale with diverse cropping. Farmers engaging in direct marketing need to be flexible, timing their production schedule with their distribution strategy. There is also an emphasis on fostering social linkages with others that shape economic activity within the direct marketing paradigm. The truly sustainable agriculture is better suited to direct marketing, as the interaction of small-scale production and collaboration through social relations (farmer-to-consumer relations, farmer-to laborer relations and farmer-to-farmer relations) are well suited to internalizing social costs due to face-to-face interactions. In sum, direct marketing offers an avenue for financial viability in the midst of a concentration of profits in the hands of large agribusiness.

In addition, the use of information technology in promoting special local products and disclosing information about the producers must also be encouraged to enhance information flow between the producers and consumers. The IT has increased the level of knowledge of the farmers and contributed significantly to the marketing of agricultural products in Uchiko town. Therefore, the IT expansion has also contributed to the rural communication network development.

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