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The Significance of Formation of JDF and the Reflection on its First Year

Katsunori FUJII
Board Chairman, Japan Disability Forum

A year has just passed since the Japan Disability Forum (JDF hereafter) was established. On this occasion, I would like to briefly summarize the process of JDF's establishment, its objectives and characteristics, and its first year activities and projects.

1. Formation of a Joint Organization as a Representative Entity in Disability Field in Japan

After about a year of preparation, the "JDF Establishment Conference" was held on October 31, 2004 at the Japan National Council of Social Welfare Hall.

Although we spent only one year directly involved in the preparation, the establishment of a joint organization beyond the borders of individual disability organizations had been long awaited. The establishment of such an organization had been considered since the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981), as far back as a quarter of a century ago. Probably the time had not yet been ripe for forming this type of organization. It was through the events to commemorate the final year of the UN Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (the Sapporo Forum and the Osaka Forum) that we gradually consolidated cooperation and fostered mutual trust among related organizations. The delegation of observers for the Ad Hoc Committee on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also played an important role to build momentum toward the establishment of JDF.

Even though it is only one year since JDF was established, its establishment clearly will be epochmaking in the history of the disability field in Japan. On the day of its establishment, the representatives from JDF member organizations held an inauguration ceremony in the morning. It was followed by the "Special Seminar on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" in the afternoon and a reception in the evening to commemorate the establishment of JDF..

JDF has two broad objectives. One is to exercise influence within the country. Under the unprecedented fiscal crisis in Japan, the prospect for domestic policies concerning persons with disabilities is not very promising, and it is therefore required to further intensify and improve cooperation among related organizations. In terms of both legislation and administration, individual efforts made by each organization have not brought about substantial results, and it is crucial to act collectively so that disability organizations as a whole can establish a strong presence and exercise influence. Secondly, JDF aims to enhance its capacity for international activities. International disability NGOs are acting vigorously in Western countries as well as in Central and South America. We need to firmly unite as one, to catch up with these organizations. By closely working together, we already have an outcome. JDF was approved as a member NGO of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in December 2004.

In addition to its objectives, it is also important to mention the characteristics of JDF. Its "prospectus (establishment outline)" resolved at the time of its establishment says: "... The 11 promoting organizations (listed below) will seek to establish a new collaborative organization to fulfill our responsibility and play a significant role so that we can promote

our common projects, and to sincerely represent persons with disabilities in Japan, while respecting individual member organizations' opinions and actions. ..." What's particularly important here is that we recognized each organization's uniqueness and freedom by declaring to "respect individual organizations' opinions and actions."

2. Based on the Four Themes

One of the major issues discussed during the preparation process of establishing JDF was about the contents of its activities and projects. We tried to identify pillars of actions by considering what kind of activities can make the most of the first collaborative organization of this kind in our country, and also what kind of activities can be shared as a common theme among the member organizations. As a result of the discussion, we decided to focus on the following four themes as the major axes of JDF activities and projects: 1) promotion of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2) promotion of the "Second Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons" and the "Asia Pacific Disability Forum (ARDF)," 3) promotion of policies concerning persons with disabilities in Japan, and 4) enforcement of national legislation on the anti-discrimination against and the rights of persons with disabilities. In other words, JDF deals with two international themes and two domestic themes. We set up four working committees by theme and assigned member organizations to each of them. They have already initiated specific activities. Each organization had already had their own involvement in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Second Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. From now on they deal with the themes systematically as JDF.

The following are the official members and observers as of the establishment of the Forum: (9 official members)

- Japan Federation of Organizations for Persons with Physical Disabilities ("Nissinren")
- Japan Federation of the Blind
- Japanese Federation of the Deaf
- Japan Council on Disability
- Japan National Assembly of Disabled People's International
- Inclusion Japan
- National Federation of Families of Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities in Japan ("Zenkaren")
- Japan National Council of Social Welfare
- Japanese Society for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities

(2 observers)

- Japan National Group of Mentally Disabled People
- National Deaf-Blind Association

Afterwards, Spinal Injuries Japan and the All Japan Association of Hard of Hearing People also joined JDF. The current total number of official members and observers is 13. Mr. Akira Kodama (former chairman of Nissinren) was appointed as the first president of the Forum, and was later succeeded by Mr. Eiichi Ogawa, the current chairman of Nissinren.

Concerning the future form of JDF in proceeding its activities, the prospectus (establishment outline) states, "... from now on, within its large framework as JDF, divisions for different fields will be set up such as a group of persons with disabilities, a families and supporters group, a project group, and a specialist group. Each division will

pursue extensive discussions on its own issues ... ” However, at present JDF has not reached the stage yet to form such an organization.

JDF has three issues at present. The first relates to the organizational foundation. More precisely, it includes 1) creation of the Constitution and 2) consolidation of its fiscal foundation. Secondly JDF needs to put the activities of working committee on a track. On top of the international themes that have already started to be dealt, how we have to deal with domestic themes. The Forum’s third issue is to appeal its existence and roles extensively to the society. What is particularly important for JDF in this phase is to demonstrate its capacity by achieving successful results in each activity and project. As for the administrative office, it is temporarily established within the Japanese Society for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities.

3. Reflecting on JDF’s First Year - building its foundation

It can be said that JDF has spent its first year devoting to building its foundation. Although the outcomes are yet far from remarkable achievements, the Forum has been focusing on some activities.

Firstly, JDF is becoming to respond systematically in international activities. More concretely, two working committees has played a key role respectively in 1) the promotion of adopting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the UN and 2) the promotion of the Second Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. In particular, JDF successfully delegated observers to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (for the purpose of lobbying as well), enhanced coordination and negotiation with the government through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and issued publications including the brochures. When “the Federation of Members of the Diet for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” was formed in the Diet on February 22, 2005, JDF actively cooperated with the members of the Diet.

Secondly, JDF has made extensive efforts to build an organizational foundation. The primary focus was on drawing up the JDF Constitution which serves as a compass to lead the organization and stabilizing its fiscal foundation. Though we initially planned to finalize the Constitution within the fiscal year 2004, we decided to spend more time before finalizing it, taking into consideration the project outcomes and working committee activities. For the time being, we will continue carrying out our activities in accordance with the “Establishment Regulations” that were set up at the time of the Forum’s foundation. The main financial resources of JDF are annual membership fee of 500,000 yen per organization and contributions from private grant funds. JDF is expected to receive an increasing amount of financial assistance from grant funds.

Lastly, I would like to mention that, as JDF had just been launched, it was also very important to create opportunities for stakeholders to interact and exchange ideas. In this respect, the monthly board meetings (made up of executive directors from each member organization) had a significant importance. It is essential to strengthen cooperation among representatives, especially in this initial development stage of the Forum where the communication is important, and at the same time to further enhance the roles of the directing board.