

Smart Mobility Challenge



Kubota Masaharu, Deputy Vice-Minister for Public Transport and Logistics Policy, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

JAPAN is working to promote new mobility services that contribute to solving regional challenges and revitalizing regional economies. We spoke with Kubota Masaharu, Deputy Vice-Minister for Public Transport and Logistics Policy at the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, about the government's initiatives.

What challenges does Japan face in the field of public transport?

Facing a declining birthrate, aging population and declining population, Japan, especially rural

areas, is seeing reduced demand for public transport. The declining population and the widespread use of private cars means it is becoming increasingly difficult for many areas to maintain public transport services. Also, securing transport for the elderly has become an issue in recent years owing to the increasing number of people aged 75 and over voluntarily surrendering their driver's licenses due to concerns about accidents caused by a decline in driving ability. Moreover, Japan will see a decrease in the working age population between the ages of 15 and 64 in the future. While labor shortages are predicted in various fields, securing drivers for public transport is also expected to be a major issue.

What initiatives is the government taking to resolve such issues?

One initiative is the Smart Mobility Challenge launched by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in June 2019. This project supports local government and private company efforts to solve regional challenges and revitalize regional economies through the introduction of transport services equipped with technologies such as IoT, AI and automated driving. Fifty-two regions across Japan have been selected as target regions for FY 2020. In many of these regions, demonstration tests of mobility-as-a-service

Photo: Courtesy of Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

(MaaS) are underway. Following the first practical application of MaaS in Finland in 2016, the service spread to other parts of Europe, the United States and the rest of the world. Broadly defined, MaaS is a service that optimally combines various transport options to get local residents and tourists to their destination, including trains, buses, taxis and bicycles, and integrates the search, reservation and payment process.

Once users make a reservation using MaaS, they can travel smoothly from their start point to their destination. In addition, MaaS allows operators to share data and coordinate their operations, resulting in streamlined services. In terms of environmental impact too, encouraging people to change from private cars to public transport helps reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

What are the characteristics and potential of MaaS in Japan?

Overseas, MaaS is mainly focused on the provision of transport services. In Japan, on the other hand, companies from diverse industries are joining and using it to provide a variety of services. For example, in the Nanyo region of Ehime Prefecture, which has been selected as a target region for the Smart Mobility Challenge in FY 2020, demonstration tests are being conducted in which railroad and bus companies as well as companies in the tourism, insurance and restaurant industries are collaborating to provide integrated services such as the sale of excursion tickets and the dissemination of information on travel insurance, local sightseeing opportunities and specialty products.

Japanese public transport operators offer a wide range of services in the areas along their routes in addition to transport, such as commerce, tourism, logistics and real estate. When these companies work with MaaS, users will be able to receive a comprehensive range of services

beyond transport, such as shopping, dining and lodging, and even welfare, education and medical care. This is expected to lead to the development of towns that enjoy greater convenience and affluence.

What kind of initiatives are planned for the Smart Mobility Challenge in the future?

An example is the use of MaaS for countermeasures against COVID-19. In the Tokachi region of Hokkaido, which was selected as a target region in FY 2020, information on public transport congestion will be provided to residents through smartphones. Likewise, in Kaga City in Ishikawa Prefecture information on congestion in stores and tourist facilities, and on countermeasures against infectious diseases will be provided to residents through smartphones. What effect this information has had on alleviating congestion will be examined. Going forward, we will expand our efforts to promote the use of public transport through methods such as facial recognition, cashless payment and increasing use of personal mobility devices such as electric kickboards to disperse congestion and reduce opportunities for person-to-person contact.

Beginning with the Smart Mobility Challenge, MaaS has the potential to become an innovation that will have a major impact on people's lifestyles, urban development and regional economies. We will provide the data and elucidate the challenges that emerge from the demonstration tests being conducted in the target areas to other regions and expand MaaS nationwide. And we hope to share and deploy the knowledge we gain from the "Japanese version of MaaS" that we create in Japan and contribute to the betterment of the lives of people around the world. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
