

Prospects for a Decentralization Scenario in the Era of Urban-Rural Multidimensional Circulation

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In 2040, it will be an era where people can enjoy a fulfilling lifestyle in both rural and urban areas. At that time, if a “local decentralized scenario” can be selected, the sustainability of rural areas will increase. This scenario will be realized only when the social infrastructure technology can be scaled down, the SDGs philosophy is shared by the people, and the conditions for social transformation are complete. In a different form from updating old plans and systems, the process of realizing a decentralized scenario should be considered now in order to enhance the value of rural life.

Key words: rural area policies, community, urban-rural multidimensional circulation

1. Introduction

At the last year’s symposium, the evaluation of the current situation was discussed for 20 years from the Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas established in 1999. Mr. Mitsuyoshi Ando made a report on rural policy, entitled “A Critical Review of the Rural Policy Development in Japan: The Decay and Future Outlook of Rural Communities” (Ando, 2020).

In addition regarding the other theme, “20 years in the future,” two major questions were raised regarding rural policy in the chair’s discussion (Tama and Kimura, 2019). One was what perspective rural communities could envision through autonomous decentralized technological innovation in the fields of ICT, energy, and mobility, which was shown as Society 5.0. The other was how the principles of the SDGs were linked to sustainable development of agriculture and rural communities.

The year 2020, when this symposium was held, is a time when discussions are concentrating on policy continuation and review for rural areas. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries has reviewed the Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas, and the fifth phase of the direct payment system for mountainous areas has begun. In addition, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications is considering new measures against depopulation.

Therefore, the chair requested to me, “Beyond the discussions so far, draw a rural decentralization scenario based on the values of rural areas created by the new

generation, and boldly show the necessary rural policies.” In this report, based on the discussions made last year, I will present such a rural vision of 2040, and discuss the issues of future rural policy in relation to the field movements I have been involved in recent years.

This paper consists of four parts. First, I will show my view on the current state of rural Japan. In particular, I would like to think about how the people of rural areas perceive the movement of young people toward rural areas in recent years. Second, I will draw four scenarios of the image of rural areas in 2040, which is 20 years ahead, and is the theme of this symposium. Among them, I will present a decentralized scenario as a case that leads to more sustainable rural areas. Third, I will introduce local projects in various parts of Japan as a move toward the realization of a regionally decentralized scenario. Finally, I will discuss the issues required for rural policy in order to realize the decentralized scenario.

2. Do Rural Residents Get the Tailwind of Young People’s Rural Orientation?

I almost have the same understanding as Mr. Ando’s report. In rural areas, the population is aging and the number of young people is small, but the movement to bring new players from outside is weak.

For example, in the direct payment system for mountainous areas, there is a strong connection with farmland, which is the property of the house, and it is difficult to use it in a

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wide area beyond the community. On the other hand, since the late 2000s, regional management organizations have been established in various places. In those organizations, seniors and classmates from elementary school and junior high school can work together, so there is a strong personal connection. Therefore, it is easy to develop activities in a wide area beyond the community. In this way, the direct payment system for mountainous areas will have a better effect when used together with other policies (Hashiguchi, 2016).

Nowadays, it is also necessary to deal with the communities whose functions are difficult to maintain. Studies have shown that in such communities, the role of those who support the local population is greater.

In the 2000s, some young people from the baby boomer junior generation are moving toward rural areas. They find values in the wisdom, technology, and culture of the elderly living in rural areas. And they can take over the value and try to enhance it to suit the present times. In other words, they are social innovators that open up the future of rural villages, and their activities create a new appeal for rural areas (Odagiri *et al.*, 2019; Zushi, 2019).

However, local residents in rural areas cannot accept the thoughts of these young people and cannot use them as a driving force for regional revitalization. I often hear the following worries from the same generation working in rural areas. “Older generations think young people aren’t interested in community activities and don’t understand their thoughts.”

As such, the future vision of rural areas cannot be shared across generations. In addition, rural residents do not always take advantage of the favorable conditions in which young people are oriented to rural areas.

3. Four Rural Development Scenarios for 2040

Then, what kind of year will the 2040 that we are discussing be? As I myself become 65 years old this year, the baby boomer junior generation will also be older. Therefore, it is predicted that the number of elderly people will peak. On the other hand, the size of younger generations will gradually decrease. So, over the next 20 years, our baby boomer junior generation will have to devise ways to make the most of the driving force of the young people who will bring a bright future to rural areas, even in a population-declining society. This idea is the same as the backcast idea that creates a new value and a future that leads to well-being under the

constraints of the global environment (Ishida and Furukawa, 2018).

In addition, young people who are active in rural areas also have the flexible idea of choosing a lifestyle according to changes in life stages such as marriage, raising children, and changing jobs. For this reason, the flow of people aiming for rural areas where they can enjoy a rich lifestyle may gradually increase. In the near future, there may be an era of going back and forth between cities and rural areas, or in other words, the era of urban-rural multidimensional circulation.

Therefore, I would like to present some scenarios for the era of urban-rural multidimensional circulation as thought experiments, focusing on the two questions presented about rural policy at the symposium last year.

One axis is the degree of autonomous decentralized technological innovation in the fields of ICT, energy and mobility. It is expected that technological innovation can be utilized even on a small scale, and that a new social harmony mechanism for each community will be created.

The other axis is the penetration of the SDGs philosophy of “realizing a society in which no one is left behind” and the degree of social change toward that. If this idea is shared by all the people, the possibility of making a big change in society will increase.

Then, for these two axes, by multiplying the favorable situation and the unfavorable situation, respectively, four scenarios are drawn. This paper cannot cover all scenarios due to space limitations. But when these two axes are combined in better conditions, a more sustainable image of rural areas will be realized. In particular, the SDGs will play a major role as an auxiliary line for mutual understanding between generations, connection between fields, and coexistence between regions.

If technological innovation of social infrastructure progresses, it will be possible to actively promote its development in rural areas. For example, even in areas with a small population, if the remote support system for medical welfare is advanced and an environment in which it is easy to give birth to a child is created, the birth rate will be improved. If MaaS can be used by individuals to move, they will be able to engage with the community even if they get older and continue to live with attachment to the area. In addition, if renewable energy and regional agriculture can be utilized on a small scale due to technological innovation, it will be possible to circulate the regional economy. Furthermore, if the IoT environment is established, work and

inbound movements that utilize rural SOHO connected to cities will become active, and tourism-related businesses that increase the value of Japanese rural culture will increase.

4. Local Projects for the Realization of the Decentralized Scenario

It can be said that local projects seen in various places today are moving toward the realization of this regional decentralized scenario.

For example, at Itoshiro, Shiratori Town, Gujo City, Gifu Prefecture, renewable energy is being used to preserve the community. There, together with migrants, community residents have invested to build a small hydroelectric power plant and use the profits to carry out various local activities. Even after that, the number of migrants who are attracted to such regional activities has increased, and they are creating new livelihoods rooted in the resources and culture of this region.

As another example, Kumamoto Farmer☆Hunter, which is expanding its network in Kumamoto Prefecture, is using the IoT to capture wild boars, like a fire brigade, and local youths are trying to maintain the community. In addition, they are also developing new products that process meat, skin, and bones in order not to waste the life of the boar. Their efforts have been introduced to the world as good practices on the official website of the United Nations as being aware of the SDGs.

The NPO Greenwood Nature Experience Education Center in Yasuoka Village, Nagano Prefecture, has been conducting study-in-village program for 30 years, accepting children from urban areas, making the most of the interaction with the residents, the natural environment, and the culture of the mountain village. In addition, this NPO holds nature experience camps that respect children's independence during summer and winter vacations, and attracts more than 1,000 children every year. Today, these activities have grown into social projects in which villagers participate in various forms, and the village office is also trying to enhance the regional power and educational power of the mountain village.

In addition, efforts such as creation of social inclusion platform, and reconstruction of the rural economic cycle through small business can be seen. All of these are challenges that view the rural areas as well-being, a place where a healthy and happy life can be realized.

These activities have the common point of valuing team

building. Various actors participated in these activities with a shared purpose, and people who supported the activities attracted more people. Now members from the surrounding area are working to improve the area. Although individual movements are small, local projects based on teamwork are increasing everywhere. We truly feel the arrival of an era in which the principles of the SDGs are put into action.

5. Conclusions

Finally, I would like to point out three issues for the realization of the decentralized scenario from the perspective of rural policy.

The first is the reexamination of the rural policy approach based on the rural community. During this time, agricultural and rural policies have emphasized consensus building at the rural community level. However, in rural communities where the population is declining and aging, resource management cannot be performed as usual. In such communities, it is not easy to start a new activity with human resources from the outside.

On the other hand, young people are also cautious about introducing new regional management organizations. In the future, when the number of people who actually work is limited, starting an organization with a short-term plan may rather increase the burden on the next generation. From this, it may be necessary to change the way of thinking based on rural communities.

Recently, as shown in certain cases, an environment in which children, outside people, and local residents work together has been created by the action from outside the area. Then, even if it takes time, the vitality of rural communities may improve. It also overlaps with the discussion of new endogenous development that recognizes urban-rural exchanges as endogenous energy (Odagiri and Hashiguchi, 2018).

Secondly, what role should governments and policies play in future rural community development? Today, as cases have shown, many volunteers, including young people, have launched many local projects to energize rural areas. In addition, human resources have been arisen to perform support activities in a position close to the rural community. Intermediate support organizations that support human resource development and networking by acting as a bridge between rural communities and the government are also showing active movements in various places.

Third is how to handle the time axis in rural policy. In 2017,

the Kyoto University Kokoro Research Center and Hitachi made policy proposals for a sustainable Japanese future utilizing AI technology (Hiroi, 2019). The recommendation suggests that by the next 6 to 8 years, the necessary policies should be implemented by selecting either an urban-concentrated type or a decentralized type. Furthermore, it is pointed out that, after 15 to 18 years, if the economic cycle in the region does not function sufficiently, the finances and environment will deteriorate extremely. For this reason, the need to continuously implement policies that enhance the economic cycle has been raised for sustainable scenarios.

In this way, Dr. Hiroi's research shows that it is necessary to determine the timing for launching a policy to switch to a decentralized scenario. At that time, an interdisciplinary discussion gathering knowledge in related fields such as environmental policy, fiscal policy, and social security policy is also essential. For that reason, I think that we should start the study process to realize the decentralized scenario in a way different from the discussion of plans and bills so far.

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