The 2021 Annual Meeting Symposium of the AESJ

Sustainability of Rural Areas in a Post Covid-19 Era: The Relevance of Trial and Error under Uncertainty

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This paper aims to pursue a desirable, feasible future image of the depopulated rural areas in Japan in a Post Covid-19 Era and the way in which both policymakers and laypersons can share that image. First, I confirm the fact that the vitality of rural areas would be supported by those concerned with rural areas by reanalyzing the census of Agriculture and Forestry and the governmental online survey. Secondly, on the basis of the fact that those concerned expect such a "place," I try to outline two issues on place-building in reference to my action research since 2012.

Key words: depopulation, sustainability, place-building

1. Introduction

In Japan, not only the policymakers but also laypersons feel misgivings about the sustainability of rural areas because of their continuous depopulation. After the Covid-19 pandemic, general strategies for sustainable development of our society were argued by the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES), which advocated the "Triple R" framework: "response" to the pandemic, "recovery" from the socio-economic damage and "redesigning" of the socio-economic systems for sustainable development. The target of redesigning by the IGES is limited mainly to sustainability against the climate change, but we should expand the target of redesigning to sustainability against depopulation in the context of Japanese rural areas.

First of all, this paper aims to redesign our cognitive framework of depopulation for redesigning socio-economic systems by reanalyzing of the census of Agriculture and Forestry and the recent governmental online survey. Secondly, I try to outline the way of redesigning the socio-economic systems in the local community.

2. Resilience of Rural Communities and Stakeholders

Odagiri (2021) pointed out that the depopulation of rural communities has provoked the decline of mutual aid in the local community through the decline of community meetings, based on his statistical analysis of Yamaguchi Prefecture. He argued that the number of community meetings per year was divided into less than 5 times and more than 13 times per year according to the total population, the population aged 30 to 64 and the number of rural communities. Figure 1 verifies this argument on a national scale.
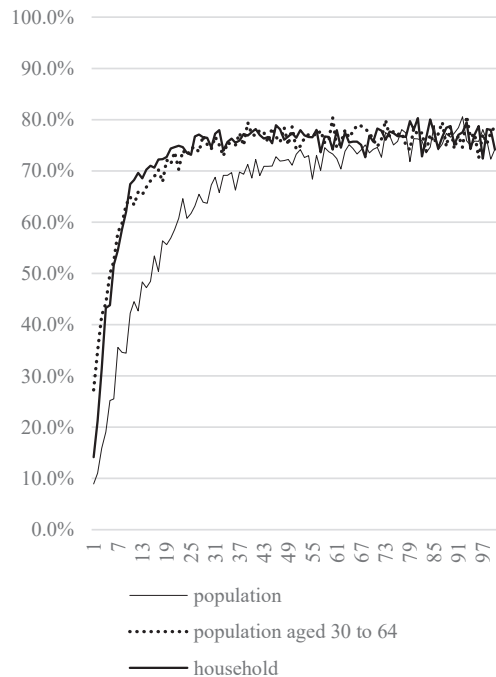
Figure 1. Ratio of local communities where the community meetings are held more than 5 times a year
(Source: The National Census in 2015 and the Census of Agriculture and Forestry in 2015)

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The results in Figure 1 can be interpreted in two ways: 1) if the population of rural community falls below 30, the decline of mutual aid in the community will be accelerated; 2) even if the population of rural community falls below 30, the mutual aid in the community will be maintained in more than half of communities if the population does not fall below 20.

I guess that the conventional doubt about the sustainability of rural communities has been based on the first interpretation, which is focused on the vulnerability of rural communities. However, the redesigning of the cognitive framework needs the shift of interpretation from the first to the second, which is focused on the resilience of rural communities.

Is this shift of interpretation unrealistic? It is not unrealistic if the following data is collated. The governmental online survey in 2019 (target group is 30 thousand living in three major metropolitan areas) says that the number of people who do not live in the rural communities but are engaged in the mutual aid in those communities is estimated to rise to about 580 thousand. This number of 580 thousand is far more than the total population of rural communities where the population falls below 30. The mutual aid in the depopulated communities could be supported by people who do not live in those communities. Additionally, if we can successfully match the depopulated communities with people who can and are willing to be engaged in mutual aid in those communities, the sustainability of rural communities should be assured in spite of the decline of inhabitants of those communities.

Recently, some journalists, researchers and policymakers have noticed the relevance of those people who do not live in a rural community but are engaged in mutual aid in that community (Tanaka, 2021). They call those people "the concerned" ("kankei jinkou" in Japanese), as it were, the people who are interested and engaged in rural communities. Public policy and business operations have begun to promote both rural communities and urban inhabitants so that they become interested in the concept of the concerned.

Conventionally, the administrative plan of the central and local government in Japan has been arranged based on the estimation of the number of inhabitants. On the contrary, the recent policy of enhancing the concerned should shift this presupposition of policymaking. In this sense, the concerned could be the key concept for redesigning socio-economic

systems against the threat of depopulation in rural communities in Japan.

2. The "Place" and Way of Place-Making

The factor of enhancing the concerned can be also specified by reanalyzing the above-mentioned governmental online survey.

Table 1. The requirements for the concerned

Requirements	Ratio
Availability of Time	27.6%
Families and Friends Sharing Values	27.2%
Reducing the Cost of Travelling	18.9%
Improvement of Relationships Damaged by the Pandemic	12.4%
Place Where One Can Make Relationships with the Inhabitants of Rural Communities	12.0%
Sufficient Income from One's Current Occupation	11.0%
Opportunities for Utilizing One's Capacity and Experience	11.0%
Income from Visits to Rural Communities	5.9%
Permission from One's Workplace to Visit Rural Communities	5.3%

(Source: The Governmental Online Survey on the concerned in 2020)

Table 1 is the results of reanalyzing of the governmental survey in 2020 (target group is 150 thousand living in nationwide urban areas). The rate of "Families and Friends Sharing Values" is equivalent to the rate of "Availability of Time." The former implication, "sharing values," is the key factor behind redesigning socio-economic systems at the cognitive level and the latter implication, "constraint of time," is induced by the conventional socio-economic systems which need to be redesigned.

On one hand, "Availability of Time," "Reducing the Cost of Travelling" and "Sufficient Income from One's Current Occupations" can be called the external requirements which cannot be met only by total and time-consuming reform of the employment system and transportation system, as it were, the socio-economic systems as a whole. On the other hand, "Families and Friends Sharing Values," "Improvement of Relationship Damaged by the Pandemic," "Place Where One Can Make Relationships with the Inhabitants of Rural Communities" and "Opportunities for Utilizing One's

Capacity and Experience" can be called the inter-personal relational requirements, which can be met by small-scale trials of everyone and every local community.

These requirements can be organized by making places where the urban inhabitants can meet friends sharing values, improve the relationship with rural inhabitants and utilize their capacities and experiences. In practice, I continued my action research on these sorts of "place-making" (Adua and Lobao, 2021) in several rural communities with some local policymakers and laypersons for ten years (Hirai, 2022). Here I try to summarize the points of way of place-making for coordinating values between urban inhabitants and rural inhabitants.

1) Most contemporary Japanese tend to see the values of urban stakeholders (including central government policymakers, researchers, and consultants) as superior to the values of rural stakeholders as the result of continuous urbanization. First, this cognitive framework should be changed for sharing values between urban and rural stakeholders. In my findings, the process of collaborating for reconstruction of a common cognitive framework could be effective for sharing values. For example, in my action research, the collaborative collection and visualization of the data on usage pattern of farmlands or direct-sale stores for local food could be effective for sharing values between visitors from urban area and rural inhabitants. In this sense, the place-making for enhancing the concerned could be started by the collaborative reconstruction of the image of the rural community.

2) In most Japanese rural communities, women, younger people, and immigrants tend to feel that they have not been given the opportunities to utilize their capacities and experiences. However, the hastening strategy of "putting the last first" (Chambers, 2014), as it were, giving the priority to women, younger people, and immigrants, should bring about a backlash (Abranjano and Hajnal, 2015) by men, elderly people, and native-born-and-bred people. In my findings, these backlashes are effectively prevented by the process of rural laypersons breaking free from intellectual dependence on urban stakeholders by the above-mentioned collaborative reconstruction of the rural community image. If the rural laypersons, especially men, elderly people, and natives have restored their pride in their own community, they also restore their mental capacity to respect others, such as women, younger people, and immigrants. This interactional respect of rural laypersons themselves should produce the opportunities for utilizing the capacities and experiences of the marginalized people.

3. Conclusion

The sustainability of Japanese rural communities is threatened not only by global climate change but also depopulation. This paper insists that the shift of cognitive focus on from the vulnerability to the resilience of rural communities despite continuous depopulation is necessary for redesigning socio-economic systems. In fact, this resilience of rural communities is estimated to be supported by the concerned who do not live in but are engaged in the mutual aid of rural communities. Moreover, the policy of enhancing the concerned of rural communities could be arranged by promoting place-making for sharing values and capacities. The place-making should be promoted by gradual mutual respect between urban and rural stakeholders and then within rural laypersons.

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