

Creating Attractive Rural Areas

-To make a society where people come and go between urban and rural areas

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INTRODUCTION

Japan's rural area is changing right now.

Young people have started to come back to the remote villages:

Young group of people who migrated from cities has started to grow and process fruits in Suo-oshima-machi, Yamaguchi pref. Since settled in the area, they have supported the newly migrated people together with local government. The population of the area has been increasing since 2012.

Young people play the leading roles to activate rural societies:

Core member of the earthquake disaster reconstruction in Ofunato-city, Iwate pref., are young people who run the fisheries business. They have started a new business of fish processing and marketing together with the local women. They have created various businesses and job opportunities in the area.

The local residents have started to take the lead on the village development:

A committee for developing nearby 10 villages was established by the local people in Natauchi, Nanao-city, Ishikawa pref. Using this committee, the villages worked together to develop some specialty products such as high quality rice, and to preserve the local traditional festivals. Some town people have started to migrate to the villages by those activities and the committee has encouraged to the ex-residents of the villages to come back to their hometown.

You can see more tie-ups between urban and rural people:

Kawaba-mura, Gunma pref. and Setagaya-ku, Tokyo has a tie-up agreement between them.

Kawaba-mura has accepted visitors from Setagaya-ku for years including traveling class of primary schools, forest experience tours and excursion of elderly people's groups. Kawaba-mura's local farm products have been marketed to Setagaya-ku. Kawaba-mura has become "the second hometown" for the people in Setagaya-ku.

Sense of value of Japan's young generation has changed by the conversion of social structure after the bubble-economy-burst. The reconstruction process from the Great East Japan Earthquake has also motivated them. Young people put more importance in connecting with nature and in having close relationship with people. These values are only available if you live in rural areas. They have started to move into the rural areas.

Young people's sense of value has motivated and integrated together with the rural people who have sought to change their stagnated communities.

People have started to come and go between cities and rural areas. This is particularly prominent among young generations. They have various interests towards rural areas.

The Committee for the Development of Active Rural Areas has studied the various cases of rural developments and has discussed about the possible roles and way of support of government and local governments. The committee hopes that this trend of "people going back to the rural areas" will be the major and lasting social move and will contribute to activate the rural areas.

Create attractive rural areas

Rural areas have ample resources.

40% of Japan's farmland is placed in hilly and mountainous areas. Each farm is small but they grow extensive regional and traditional vegetables and flowers.

Rural areas are rich in land and water, and have a lot of potential to provide energy. Woodland produces building materials and other products such as mushrooms. In recent years, woodland has attracted the supplier of wood-biomass materials for electricity and heat production.

In coastal areas, you can find various seafood which you can't find in Tokyo.

The local resources have been maintained from father to son by people who lived there. Village people work together to remove mud from irrigation canals in spring: they monitor the field in turn during the harvest time to protect products from birds and animals.

This "maintain the area by local people" has been the basis of life in the rural areas. They help each other to raise children and to support elderly people. All the village people participate in the village festivals, weddings and funerals.

In recent years, however, this community bond in rural areas has been frayed.

Depopulation and aging of residents in the rural areas has deprived the energy of communities.

Villages without community bond have faced problems of abandoned farmland, poorly looked after forest, invasion of birds and animals, and discontinued village festivals.

Seventy percent of Japan's land is woodland and the half of the rest is farmland. Problems stemming from lack of community bond not only affects the rural areas but also the whole nation. We should prevent the situation in which our national land is ravaged and cultural tradition is lost.

Rural areas have multi functions not only to supply food but to protect national land, to recharge water, to supply energy and wood, and to offer the place for studying and leisure, among others. There are newly added roles for rural areas to back up urban areas in case of natural disasters.

In order to have attractive rural areas and to maintain above mentioned multi functions of rural areas, it is essential to have someone to live there. We shall establish a society where people come and go between rural and urban areas. Rural areas should be the place where both young and old can live happily and lively.

This committee has met seven times to find possible ways to create attractive rural areas and this report is the conclusion of our discussion. Our discussion was based on the following three basic viewpoints:

- 1) It is necessary to assure that enough income to the residents in the rural areas which can make them feel worthy to work and to be able to support their families.
- 2) Since further decrease and aging of rural population is expected, it is necessary to strengthen the linkage between areas.
- 3) Attractive rural areas are public assets. Problems of rural areas should be regarded as the problem of nation, and it should be recognized by whole country.

Create job opportunities in rural areas

- (1) Create job opportunities and increase the income level by utilizing the local resources

Jobs based on the local resources are what people who migrated from urban to rural areas are looking for. Those types of jobs are peculiar in the rural areas and therefore attract the people from urban areas.

The typical industries using the rural resources are agriculture, forestry and fisheries. It is necessary not only to promote these industries, but to introduce related industries such as food processing and farm tourism. Important thing is to make sure to return the profit which stemmed from these new businesses into the area.

For this purpose, following measures are necessary in creating job opportunities and increase income level in rural areas:

- a. Create a system to circulate the economic value within the area

Make a system to reinvest the newly added value from the rural industry into the area and to prevent it to flow outside of the area.

Private companies and local government in Maniwa-city, Okayama pref., have worked together to produce renewable energy using local wood based biomass materials. The

produced energy is used locally. Some electricity is sold to the outside area, and the income is used to develop the local forestry.

Forestry people and other residents in Shiwa-cho, Iwate pref., have produced heat from their unused forest products which has been distributed to the buildings in the area. In Sumita-cho, Iwate pref., the forestry cooperatives have built a laminated wood factory using local forestry resources. Recently, they built their new town hall using local wood materials.

Creating sustainable industry with the participation of the local people will raise the value of the area and will attract more people from outside areas. The future aim is to tie up several villages and towns based on the primary industries, in order to develop together as a broader economy area.

b. Promote social businesses in rural areas

There is some trend particularly among young people to start “social businesses” in rural areas. They run their own small businesses utilizing the local resources (such as farming, forestry and fisheries) and various human resources while trying to contribute to the local community by solving various problems in the area.

local people established a company together with the local government in Unnan-city, Shimane-pref.. The company produces and sells the local agricultural products, looks after water supply business and run the local bus services.

These new small businesses will contribute to create sustainable local communities ran by local residents. It is necessary to support various people to start such businesses, possibly using crowd-funding programs.

Support to make various people to play active roles in rural areas

Women and new residents moved from cities to the rural areas can stimulate local people to rediscover the attraction of rural areas. They can discover unused local resources and dying local culture and convert them into new businesses.

There are government programs sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries as well as by the Ministry of Internal Affairs & communications that support people to move from the urban areas to rural areas A lot of the participants of those programs have settled in the rural areas after the end of the program-term and they have since contributed to activate the communities.

It is necessary to support various people to play active roles in community activities:

a. Promote women’s participation

Women play important roles in primary industries and food processing/marketing using their ability to catch consumers’ tastes and to communicate with customers. Farms where female farmers participate in the management tend to have bigger sales.

A female tomato grower has launched a business to process tomato into dried tomatoes, purees and ketchup in Takayama-city, Gifu pref. Her business was very successful and she has shown the new possibilities for farming women.

- b. Utilize the experience of people from other areas/industries

In some cases, people with business experience in urban areas have contributed to develop a new business or have advised to start such businesses in rural areas. People from other areas/industries can contribute in the field of marketing and accounting, which tend to be lacking in rural areas. Retired people can participate and contribute in improving the rural societies.

A man who used to work for the IT industry and then moved to Kyotango-shi, Kyoto pref. under the government support program has become the new manager of the once closed village store.

Make a stronger/further linkage between villages

- (1) Maintain and strengthen the function of rural community

Japan's population is now on decline. It is predicted that the decrease of population will continue at least for another 50 years. More than 13,000 villages in Japan may disappear by 2050.

It is easy to foresee that more and more villages will lose the public service necessary for daily life in the process of population decline. To tackle this problems and to make village residents to be able to live there in long terms, it is necessary to have a "core village" which can offer public services and to make a good network between other villages, thus maintain the whole community in the area.

- a. Concentrate the local facilities to the "core" villages and develop a good village network

Core village will be set in the areas of size of equivalent with the catchment area of primary schools. The core village has facilities such as clinics, elderly support centres, nursery homes and village halls. Other villages in the area will make a network to use these facilities.

Facilities for the local business such as food processing and exchange with urban people will also be set up in the core villages.

In Jinego, Yurihonjo-shi, Akita pref., food processing facilities have been built together with the "Roadside Station" and elderly home. Local farmers sell their products at the "Roadside Station". The place has become the centre for both business and welfare of the area.

- b. Land use planning and management by local residents

The planning of the rural areas must include the land use plan of the area, such as how to maintain the farmland, where to build the related factories, and how to concentrate on day-to-day life facilities. People who live there should play the core role to make land use plan.

(2) Maintaining the local resources

Farmland and irrigation facilities have been maintained for centuries by the villages in Japan. This village work has been the basis of the strong tie of the residents and they have supported each other for their everyday life.

However, the village population has been aging and now a lot of villages have faced with difficulties on maintaining farmlands and irrigation facilities. This also has diminished the everyday communication among village people.

There are cases where several villages cooperate together to look after farmland in the area. Cooperation among villages will not only maintain the local resources but support the life of the village residents.

a. Promote to cooperate in the larger areas in order to maintain the multi-functions of rural areas

If the irrigation facility in the village is not well maintained, there would be more abandoned farmland which will have wild animals invade the area and eventually the local farmers could quit farming or move out of the village.

It is important to maintain the multi-function of the area through the cooperation of villages of looking after farmlands and irrigation facilities, forests, coasts, and other local resources.

In longer terms, there is a possibility to let outside people manage the farmlands. It is up to further discussions among farmers in the villages, farmers from the outside the village and non-farming village residents on how they can look after the village in the future.

b. Promote the activities to support day-to-day life in the rural areas

There are some cases where young people and farmers set up a group/company/non-profit organization together with local residents to maintain the local resources and develop the farming/forestry/fisheries in the area. These organizations also substitute the community functions such as supporting elder people in the villages.

In Kushiike, Joetsu-shi, Niigata pref., 11 villages have agreed to cooperate each other to support the villages without enough farmers by looking after the farmlands. The villages have cooperated together to develop a food processing industry, to exchange with urban areas and to collect farm products from each farmgate.

Strengthen the linkage between rural and urban people

(1) Promote of tie up between rural and urban areas

Rural areas have various functions, such as to supply food, to protect land and water resources and to prevent natural disasters. Maintaining rural community will benefit not only the rural people but all the people in Japan.

On the other hand, having linkages with people from the urban area will give rural people opportunities to discover the attraction of the area, such as natural resources and traditional culture.

Rural and urban areas complement each other. Both rural and urban areas should be “unique and independent”, and should communicate with each other. Following measures are to promote the tie up between rural and urban areas:

a. Promote the understanding on rural areas

Provide opportunities to urban people to find about the various values of rural areas and its merit to the urban areas.

Naganuma-cho, Hokkaido, has launched the farm-stay project in 2003, with the purpose to “narrow the distance between consumers and producers”. The area has now over 150 farms where children can stay. Over 3,700 children of primary schools and high schools have stayed in the area annually. These children have enjoyed the opportunities to experience farming and rural life.

Yasuoka-mura, Nagano pref., has a project to accept children from urban areas for 1-year stay in the village. These children have learned about the forest and forestry while their stay.

b. Expand the exchange between urban and rural areas

The exchange between urban and rural people can give the opportunities for urban people to understand the value of rural areas. Rural people can regain their pride and confidence through the exchange with urban people.

The exchange of people between urban and rural areas has increased recently. There are more farm stay opportunities and farm restaurants.

There are also some cases where exchange agreement has been made between local governments, universities and companies. Some of these agreements imply the support programs when a big natural disaster occurs.

Local people in Akikamitsu, Tanabe-shi, Akita pref., has transformed the ex-school buildings into farm restaurants and some facilities into places where they can have farming experience.

Forestry cooperative in Sakaki-machi, Nagano pref. has made an agreement with a big retailing company in Tokyo. The retailing company sends their staff to look after the forest on volunteer basis.

Farms for stay and local universities set up a committee in Towada-shi, Aomori pref. to attract the foreign school excursion groups. Foreign students in the university have helped translation. As a result, not only foreign students but ordinary foreign tourists had increased by three times in three years.

(2) Provide various choices in lifestyles

Increased opportunities of exchange between urban and rural areas will give people more choice in their lifestyles. Some people will make frequent visit to rural areas, stay in rural areas, or even move into rural areas. It will also encourage people who moved out from rural areas to go back to their hometown.

a. Promote migration of people from urban to rural areas

Some rural areas have managed to increase the population by accepting the “new residents” from the outside areas. In general, such areas are keen to accept new residents. Local information disseminated by the new residents and better business opportunities are also the causes of increased population. There are various possible ways to promote the migration from urban to rural areas, such as to transmit information about the life and job opportunities of rural areas, to offer “trial” opportunities to migrate into the rural areas and to provide the opportunities of meeting between local people and people who are interested in migrate to the areas.

People who wants to move into Irokawa-area, Nachikatsuura-cho, Wakayama pref. can interview 15 of local people to decide whether they will move in or not. Due to this system, the area has now many more children than before, which has contributed to maintain the local schools.

b. Strengthen and improve support programs by the government

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Forestry has started the project in 2009 to subsidize the young people who wants to work in the rural areas. More than a thousand young people have participated in the project so far and more than half of them had continued to live in the area even after the project term was finished.

Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has similar project in which 1,000 people have participated and over 60% of them had continued to live in the area.

There is a plan to merge these two government projects and make them to be more efficient and effective.

Our next step

(1) Lets' start

All successful rural development cases have their origins on their on-site practices.

Residents of Seki, Nantan-city, Kyoto pref., have sought to utilize the local resources. After having numerous number of discussions among the residents, now the community has started to sell the local Black-Soybean, as well as to provide young people some opportunities to experience the life in rural areas.

Natauchi, Nanao-city, Ishikawa pref. has once started their local development activities in

1981, which was failed due to the conflicts between villages. But they restarted the activities in 1992, and now it has established an incorporated village organization to look after farmlands in the area.

We don't think it is appropriate to call these cases as "good practices", since each area has its own way to develop and you can't tell whether these cases are good or not.

But we can still learn a lot from actual cases. We put the summary of various cases in this report hoping that they can give some clues to the people who want to involve themselves into rural development.

The important thing is to move into action. The trigger for the actions may be some approaches from the local government or may be an idea that comes from a visitor in the area.

(2) We must bring rural and urban areas closer

A lot of urban people are interested in rural areas but has no clue in how to make contact with rural areas.

According to the opinion poll in 2014, 89.9% said it is necessary to have a exchange between urban and rural, which is 10 points more than the opinion poll conducted in 2005. Also, 31.6% of urban people have some desire to live in rural areas, which is more than 10 points higher than the opinion poll in 2005.

This increase of numbers has not necessarily resulted in the increase of exchange or migration between urban and rural areas, but there is a solid trend of urban people trying to make more involvement in the rural areas.

In Hokuto-city, Yamanashi pref., a person who used to run a management consultant company in Tokyo has moved into the area, cultivated the abandoned farmland together with young people is now running a vegetable farm. Various companies use this farm for staff training and for customers' excursion tour.

In Nishiawakura-son, Okayama pref., people who have supported the village's "100 years forest project" invested in the newly introduced forestry machineries using crowd funding program. It has encouraged the exchange of rural and urban people which resulted in the increase of young people to migrate into the village.

Every activity by rural and urban people can contribute to activate rural areas and thus to protect Japan's national land. Each of us has to understand and make a move to create attractive rural areas.

We wish this report will help the people who are about to start the activities to develop the attractive rural areas.

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