

Are Small Rural Communities Doomed?

Reflections from the Japanese Front Lines Where Agriculture, Youth, Imagination and Desperation Collide



I recently traveled with a group of US rural advocates and experts to explore whether others elsewhere are learning better ways to reposition rural communities for fruitful futures. Organized by the Japan Society Innovators' Network together with the Japan NPO Center, our traveling "institute" also consisted of a remarkable group of American rural advocates and experts from Nebraska, Ohio and West Virginia.

Regardless of geography, one story is playing out the world over: Rural areas] shrink whilst mega-cities grow by leaps and bounds. For instance, since 2010, NYC grew in population by [5.5% percent](#). Rural areas are not so lucky. They are defined as small towns and hamlets that are situated beyond commuting distances to a 50,000+ town. Between [2015-2016](#), these non-metro areas experienced the sixth straight year in modest losses.

In North America, where we act as individuals first and then only as communities if we must, we allow cities to consume rural land and people. Our devotion to speed, efficiency, and scale combines to be a force worth reckoning. If work opportunities exist elsewhere, we say, “go forth and seek them.” Increasingly, these opportunities are not only in cities but in municipal zones that may encompass several cities (e.g., from Washington, DC to Boston, MA). While it is true this dynamic also plays out nearly everywhere on the planet, in North America we not only answer the urban call but celebrate the logic of dismantling communities that no longer have a role in the global economy. I recently visited the small community of Little Bay Islands in Newfoundland in Canada. Once a robust cod fisheries, with a processing plant offering onshore employment, today it is a place without a reason to be. The cod are gone. Houses are sold 20 cents on the dollar; and inhabitants voted to unincorporate, providing each homeowner with a stipend to move elsewhere.

Is this what we’ve come to? Communities serve the economy and not the other way round? Indeed, this seems to be the case in Japan too. The post-World War II modernization occurred so rapidly that rural homesteads were and are still left to decay. Alex Kerr describes in his memoir, [Lost Japan](#), why rural communities in Japan are commonly referred to as senior living; and that when families flee to the cities (most notably Tokyo) for work, they leave everything behind in their abandoned house. Talk about a clean break from the past!

We’re All in This Together

With the global devotion to *giganticism*, big cities are winning at the expense of smaller cities and in particular diminutive rural towns and hamlets that are not deemed essential to the flow of mass production and mass tourism. The severity of this situation varies from major financial constraints (due to a diminishing tax base) to a downright existential threat (as young people flee and aging residents struggle to keep up with the physical demands of farming). In the United States and elsewhere, food has become a currency on which declining communities are finding new ways to trade. When combined with tourism, it gains particular value: Consider how farmers markets, farm-to-table restaurants, and harvest festivals not only rebrand a place but also accelerate community planning for necessary new and renewed commercial infrastructure and skills: roofs to shelter outdoor markets, shared-use kitchens, and slaughter facilities.

In this regard, what does Japan have to teach us? If its rural communities are in even more dire straits than ours (with [93%](#) of Japanese living in cities, as compared to 81% in the USA), then what’s to learn? Visiting Japan, for me, is like traveling to the future. With modernization having come to Japan so rapidly, the lines between urban and rural lives are easier to decipher: One is traditional and the other thoroughly modern. Moreover, the Japanese cultural default to lean on communitarian solutions (whereas we turn to individuals) yields remarkably original outcomes. In fact, it is this tension in two areas that provide the most fruitful international learning between Japan and the USA: between tradition and innovation, community and individual.

Policies Matter

In the United States and Japan, we are shrinking. Increasingly urban, educated populations are not replacing themselves. Young people are not having children, let alone getting married. They are caught in an urban spiral of careers, stress, and underemployment (for which children are a burden, rather than asset). A favored solution in the USA to this shrinkage is to open borders to migrant labor. New workers are handy. They work. They do jobs others refuse to perform or are no longer skilled to perform. (In particular, agriculture fits this scenario.) But what if -- as in Japan -- immigration is not a viable option? In Japan, there are some recent changes in policies for agricultural guest workers; however, steps are small and it is difficult to imagine that Japan would accept a disruptive number of outsiders to offset the rural population deficit.

Meanwhile, there is considerable interest in strategies that make rural life attractive to young people: new, returning or homegrown. In our travels, we met all kinds. One striking remark we heard from a young woman in the town of Tono (population 28,000 in Iwate Prefecture) was: "It's lonely." With so many seniors, there is little for the young to do, making it difficult to meet others, go on dates, fall in love, and so forth. This is a stark reminder that people live 24-hour lives, not just at work.

Many strategies we encountered across Japan utilize an important, yet still controversial, national program: Chiikiokoshi Kyoryoku-tai (or Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad, also known simply as the Squad Program). Introduced in 2008, during a rare moment in modern Japanese history when the opposition (to the perennially in power, Liberal-Democratic Party) ruled. The program's purpose is to resettle urban "immigrants" to rural communities in a desperate quest for youth. Most are intended to add value to agriculture, learn skills and hopefully remain as permanent transplants (won over by rural tranquility and sanity). In the decade since its inception, nearly 5,000 people have settled in nearly 1,000 municipalities. Far from policy perfection, many leave after their 24-month term is up. They earn a stipend whilst a Squad member, but it is on all accounts a meager sum: Just enough to afford the basics.

The Squad program resembles our Americorps program: Young people sign up for socially useful work with nonprofit organizations in marginalized places. Here, too, the stipend is modest and Corps members often peel away once their service is complete. Nevertheless, one major difference is important to recognize: While Americorps may attract permanent migrants to places in need, it is a secondary benefit. The Squad program was designed to incentivize young, urban talent to relocate rural communities and become a permanent part of its future. We met one Squad member in Tsuwano (Shimane Prefecture) who has started a specialty meat business: Saki Kurihara. She traps wild boar: a scourge for farmers. Her plans are to remain after her contract is complete in order to grow her business, [Blue Boar](#). Though she was raised in Tokyo, Kurihara-san has come to value rural life, the relationships, the beauty and the smell of life away from the city. In this case, the Squad program contributes to business start-ups. Introduced during a time of acute un- and under-employment (especially among the young), Squad also has something to offer to the policy concept hotly debated in this age of rapid technological innovation: A guaranteed income.

Questioned in some circles as a costly give-away for the young to disrupt rural communities for a year or two with relatively little accountability, we encountered two Squad innovations. In Tono, we met Junichi Tamura of the [Next Commons Lab](#) and in Tsuwano (Shimane Prefecture), [FoundingBase's](#) Kenji Hayashi. In both cases, nonprofit organizations intervene to provide training and a sense of community for Squad members. Additionally, both organizations have well developed (and visually presented) theories of change. This speaks to a seismic cultural shift in Japan towards social enterprise and away from stodgy, bureaucratic thinking. In Tamura-san's case, Next Commons Lab receives Squad money directly from the national government. It is normal for these funds to be distributed directly to the Prefecture (where passion and skills to deploy funds purposefully are less certain). What do these mean for us in North America? Future learning could take place with parceled out programs within Americorps, most notably the widely praised [FoodCorps](#) program. It places members in public schools to develop and manage school gardens.



Why Beer Might Just Be the Key for Young People's Future

Tono is a beautiful place. While the allure of the mountains, hops and a small walkable urbanscape may not be enough to lure the young to this aging community, it does have hops. And when you've got hops, beer must be nearby. Or at least, this was thinking that went into craft beer enthusiast, Junichi Tamura's development of a brewery and meeting place. We visited Tono

Brewing: Located in a charmingly renovated storefront in Tono. It has the hip vibe of a Brooklyn brewery but with the kind of attention to detail only found in Japan. We enjoyed a delicious curry, craft beers and learned of Next Commons Lab's vision: 1) increase the number of hops farmers from its current and historically-low number of four back to something that resembles early 1970s numbers of approximately 100; 2) rebrand the hops region (based on a strategic input for making beer) into a region known for the end product -- beer -- and everything associated with its enjoyment, like festival, experiences and community; and 3) attract a young community of creative workers to settle in Tono to grow an alternative economy that invests in the assets and dreams of those who return to the land and forego the trappings of the consumer economy of the city.

Still very much in its infancy, it is too early to tell whether this ambitious vision to reinvent a taste of place (around beer); however, there is something intoxicating about a team of young people utilizing government resources (the Squad program) to enable the young to settle in elderly communities desperate for a future. What could be a disruptive force, Next Commons appears to effectively navigate old school and old style leadership in the town well; forge ties with conventional industry leaders in the beer sector (most notably Kirin); and recognize that in order

to succeed, they must attend to non-work amenities like a social life for the newly arrived, meeting spaces, and a sense of community.

One particularly interesting element to the work in Tono is beer itself. From Turin to Tono, Portland to Puyang, hand-crafted beers excite the young. They are a tool for a next generation of entrepreneurs and activists to experiment with innovative concepts: B-corps, worker cooperatives, and philanthropy. Why is beer so conducive to youthful innovation? Changes in consumer taste, shifts in models for growth (away from packing, shipping and private consumption and towards small batch production and shared enjoyment in a beer hall), and the quick fermentation process all contribute to making beer strategic. When a winemaker improves a technique, it takes at least a year to learn if it works. This means that considerable financial and intellectual capital is invested in risks. By contrast, beer takes weeks. Learning is quicker, overhead is lower, and enjoyment is younger. The embrace of craft beer (together with a wider obsession for all things fermented) may very well cultivate a new culture that values commerce and community in equal doses. In this regard, the love for beer is real. However, beer is also really only a tool to build community for a generation of changemakers in business and society.

Kuni: Is There a Right Size for Community?



For me, the most inspiring stop on the tour was the visit with Tsuyoshi Sekihara and his Karmiechigo Yamazato Fan Club. Located in another shrinking rural community, this mountainous one in Niigata Prefecture has been incorporated into the nearby municipality of Joetsu (a coastal city of 193,000 people and situated on the coast of the Sea of Japan). Karmiechigo is a glimpse into Japan's rural past. Imagine beautiful yet worn traditional Japanese houses dotted on the landscape, between small rice fields. The 2,000 people who live in the sparsely populated hamlets are mostly elderly and depend heavily upon social services that are otherwise difficult to access (due to their geographic isolation).

This is where Regional Management Organization (or RMO), led by Sekihara-san, comes in. For the past 15 years, he has built an organization that provides a healthy balance between direct social services to inhabitants, providing leadership training to a young cadre of Squad members, and the development of a patiently designed set of alternative institutions (e.g., museum, hiking trails, café, cultural festivals, and a community center).

What are the ideas that hold these various activities together? For Sekihara-san, the concept that holds it all together is Kuni. This complex Japanese term refers to the community: be it a village, city, prefecture or nation. He implores us to reimagine what it means to be a part of a community, to be obligated to the dignified lives of others (especially those most vulnerable -- elderly rice growers). While there are elements of yearning for a simpler, rural past in this kind of community soul searching, Sekihara-san also reminds us that to achieve kuni, it is quite simple. Follow 12 important functions and the kuni is restored. Are these the right twelve functions for an organization that provides gravity to a place that is sinking beneath the weight of age, isolation and economic marginalization?

I cannot say for certain, yes, these are the correct functions. They deserve greater attention than what can be explored here, but they are specific and practical. Built upon years of practice, they include serving the role of intermediary, protecting nature, educating school children about the region, and engaging urbanites and providing opportunities for them to visit rural places. Sekihara-san is onto something very original. Having run a regional nonprofit organization devoted to commerce and direct service related to food, I forever struggled with how to balance short-term services with long-term social change. Additionally, our organization would often encounter the predictable critique that "what you're doing is great, but come to me once you've scaled up." We in America are exporters of this dangerous devotion to scale.

Sekihara-san's adoption of the RMO model is in part a response to this question of scale. I am not particularly familiar with RMOs except that it appears to be a successful model to deliver holistic community development in India. I'd be hard pressed to identify a similar entity in the USA that straddles so many sectors (i.e., health, culture, agriculture, tourism). For one, Sekihara-san argues that his organization's role as manager of the region's affairs, its ability to serve as gatekeeper and resource for inhabitants, and negotiate public services (and provide them when the public sector cannot) gives the RMO credibility.

How and why does this work? Sekihara-san's leadership, years of commitment to a place, and (as described before) a commitment to a particular scale of community. What do I mean by this? Sekihara-san argues that we need to consider the right scale for living in a community. A community of fewer than 500 people may be too small attract the critical mass of services, commerce, etc. Moreover, the scale also makes it susceptible to tyranny, gossip, and stagnation. At 50,000 people, the community is too large to provide intimacy, access to those in power, and transparency. For instance, if you don't personally know whom you are making decisions for, then it is easier to ignore them. However, in this Goldilocks search for the right size of a community, Sekihara-san contends that somewhere between 500 and 2,000 people is the right size. Residents live close to nature, yet have enough social interaction to anonymity when it is necessary and warmth when it is needed (i.e., festivals). This proposed scale corresponds closely to the 19th century American utopian community of the

To visit Karmiechigo is to visit a traditional Japanese agricultural community that is clinging onto a past that is difficult to sustain. Stunningly beautiful, it is difficult to grasp that this mountain community -- with its clean mountain water serving rice fields -- is only 20 minutes away from the sea, and also Joetsu. There are problems, of course. It may just be too late to save the knowledge of the old. As for women, they are well represented as consumers to the RMO; however, are they decision-makers in the organization? Gender equity is a challenge in the USA. On all accounts maybe even more so in Japan. We met women who work for the RMO and gained some insights as to what they experience. I would like to learn more.

When asked about his influences, Sekihara-san shrugs that he is a designer, who looks at art books. His readings are of philosophy and science. Intrigued with his intentional description of the necessity of autonomous communities, I would like to know more. After all, isolated mountain communities are ideal incubators of important ideas about why people, communities and the economy matters. Consider Mondragon in Spain, the writings of Russian author Peter Kropotkin, and the very Italian rural villages that gave birth to Slow Food.

Fanclubs Rule!

In Karmiechigo, it is the Fan Club that provides the community its public face, its audience. This concept is thoroughly Japanese and worth greater exploration for American audiences who hunger for creative means to engage urban with rural, and supply with demand. The primary tool that delivers valued products (and the people who produce them) to the public is the Taberu Journal. Led by journalist Atsuhisa Emori, this network of beautifully designed food magazines. Subscribers receive pages of history, recipes, and photographic narratives about a specific product produced in a specific place. Accompanying the Journal are samples of that product. The scallop fisherman we met -- Jun Sasaki -- described to us how the Journal changed his life: Introducing him to a community of consumers after the 2011 tsunami who became more than interested consumers but fans of his



cooperative's scallops, and the community's desire to restore safety and beauty to the coast. While the Journal serves a specific commercial strategy to grow markets for high-value products to audiences seeking quality, it does so much more than mobilize financial capital. Its real value is to forge social capital between urban and rural people.

Thirty-years ago, Americans began to develop Community Supported Agriculture organizations to forge direct relationships between farmers and consumers. The CSA model was inspired by Japan's famous Seikatsu Club (consumer cooperative). Might the Tubera Journal and its associated Fan Clubs inspire another wave of American copycats to reach deeper into the

forging trust, social harmony and investment between urban consumers (who crave authenticity and story) and rural producers (who are hungry for a new economy)?

In the time we spent with the Ryori Fisheries Cooperative's Sasaki-san, we discovered how his association with the Fan Club has increased his pride in their scallop techniques, developed his personal skills to communicate his community's livelihood to the rest of Japan, and altered his relationship with his craft. In my work running farmers markets, I have noticed similar personal and professional development among successful vendors. In this regard, the Fan Club is an incubator for leadership development.

With what we learned of the Kamiechigo Yamazato Fan Club, Sekihara-san's RMO is stretching the relationship between supply and demand even further. Their Fan Club members (who purchase the rice) become part of something far larger and meaningful than the commercial transaction. They become party to a "rice covenant." As members, they are invited to spend weekends in Kamiechigo to help raise the crops, enjoy the sense of community, and feel secure that they have a place to come to should a disaster place them in that position of needing a sanctuary. In a nation that knows natural disasters all too well, this is more than just a conceptual give-away. It presumably has real meaning. Members gain an attachment to the place that produces the rice they enjoy in their homes. When they cook the rice, they become part of the isolated, vulnerable rural community who feeds them.

Conclusion

The solidarity between urban and rural, old and young is profound. It speaks to the values of the Fan Club, Next Commons, and FoundingBase: To cultivate mutual aid, social obligation and care for one another. The manner in which these varied social enterprises link urban with rural and old with young speaks to an attention to detail, and creativity not readily found in the individualistic North America. I encourage more learning and sharing between Japan and the USA.

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Further reading:

Kerr, Alex, [*Lost Japan: Last Glimpse of Beautiful Japan*](#)

Samuels, Alana, "[Can Anything Stop Rural Decline?](#)" in *The Atlantic*

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

(#1 men standing) Public officials observe the impact of volcanic eruptions upon Miyakejima, the small Island eight hours by sea from the coast of Japan (and part of Tokyo).

(#2 festive beer drinking) The Tono community of hops farmers celebrate the arrival of the 2018 autumn Kirin beer.

(#3 man standing in nature) Karmiechigo Yamazato Fan Club founder Tsuyoshi Sekihara stands amidst the community's pristine forest that yields wasabi.

(#4 man in white boots) Fisherman Jun Sasaki describes the process of harvesting the Koishihama Scallop and the impact of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami upon his livelihood and that of his fellow Chori Fishery Cooperative members.