

# Population Decline and the Strengths of Regional Areas

What are the advantages of regional areas against the background of ongoing population decline? The experts interviewed for this issue of *My Vision* point to lifestyle benefits, including the warmth of local communities and their function in providing a safety net, the presence of the natural environment, and the maintenance of traditions. They also indicate that advantages can be found in non-urban areas in terms of the cultivation of individual sensibility, the ability to provide a rounded education to children, and the opportunity for entrepreneurship.

MyVision

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# What Advantages do Regional Areas present in contrast to Cities?

As populations and economic activity become concentrated in major cities, regional areas face the issue of rapid depopulation, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain local communities.

Clarifying the advantages presented by regional areas over cities will be an important element in reexamining the allocation of roles between country and city, and in considering future strategies for regional areas.

What are the advantages of regional areas? And how can we draw out these advantages?

In this edition of *MyVision*, we ask scholars in the fields of philosophy, agricultural policy, and economic geography, a former prefectural governor, and an individual with extensive experience of regional revitalization, all of whom possess a deep knowledge of the issues.

Interviewer: Manabu Shimasawa, NIRA Senior Researcher

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## Towards an era of return to the country

Tokumi Odagiri

Professor, School of Agriculture, Meiji University

In the past several years, a burgeoning interest in rural lifestyles has developed among Japan's younger generation. In Shimane Prefecture, for example, a growing number of young people from outside the prefecture are settling in particularly remote areas such as islands and mountainous regions. The reason that young people are turning to the country is their desire for real human connections and a place to belong. They see sub-village networks and communities once felt to be oppressive and backward as warm, and the image of people working independently in the country is attractive to them. This is the value and appeal of rural areas.

In Britain, and particularly in England, the rate of population growth is higher in rural areas than in cities. People in their 30s and older are discovering that they enjoy living in the country in an ongoing trend of counter-urbanization. The similar trend which has sprung up in Japan is still supported by policy measures, but it is hoped that a return to the country will take root as a natural process here also.

In order to realize this, policy measures to maintain lifeline infrastructure for rural villages will be essential in view of the inevitable decline of the small and medium-sized cities close to these regional communities. Taking severe financial restrictions into consideration, it will be necessary to reorganize small communities into zones with cities of a specific size at their centers. During this process of reorganization, judgments will need to be made regarding the infrastructure functions to be maintained and those to be discontinued based on considerations specific to that zone. The opinions of the young people who represent the future of the community should be reflected in these decisions.

Another change that we should pay attention to is the fact that in

recent years a new form of regional community has begun to arise. Multiple sub-village units are coming together and adopting consensus-type decision-making systems which reflect the opinions of women and young people. The greatest defect of smaller communities up to the present has been that decisions have traditionally been made by older people and males, and that young people and women have been excluded. If we can create high-quality communities which young people find value in devoting their lives to, then I believe that a trend of young people returning to the country will take root. ■

Professor Odagiri conducts research on issues of rural regeneration, in particular in relation to rural communities, specializing in agricultural policy and the governance of rural areas.

## Regional areas are ideal for fostering human resources

Sukeshiro Terata

Member of the House of Councillors,  
former Governor of Akita Prefecture

As we hear of increasing social inequality, we should look positively at the fact that houses and fields are unused in Japan's regions, offering the possibility of affordable accommodation and food. While they may not offer an abundance of high-paying jobs like large cities, low-income earners can live comfortably and raise and educate their children well in regional areas. The value of these areas is that they are able to function as a safety net. If we enhance support for childcare, educational services for small children, and elementary and secondary education in regional areas, younger people will also realize their appeal.

Regional areas actually possess considerable advantages in terms of the provision of education. Akita Prefecture has led the country in a variety of initiatives, including the introduction of class sizes of no more than 30 students, and the prefecture's

students continue to achieve high scores in the national survey of academic ability conducted by MEXT. Akita International University is also highly regarded for its unique educational approach. Japanese students are obliged to engage in activities with foreign students and to do part of their study overseas, enabling them to leave Japan to experience different societies and different cultures. These experiences will benefit Japan as a whole, and even if students do not later return to the prefecture, the benefits they have gained will enrich it in other ways. A globalizing Japan needs human resources who have a diverse range of experiences, enabling them to break away from their preconceived ideas. Regional areas have the potential to foster such human resources.

The biggest problem for regional communities as population decline continues is the lack of the frequent coming and going of different individuals that characterizes cities. Roles become fixed, and communities become claustrophobic and restrictive. Input from outside the regions will be essential in breaking through these constraints and creating the possibility of movement within society. In a society that encourages such active movement, the role of local governments will be to foster human resources and ensure the safety and security of the lives and property of the members of their community. ■

Based on his previous experience in the administration of Akita Prefecture, the fundamental policies that Mr. Terata advocates include regional autonomy and the development of human resources able to function in a globalized society.

## New industries will emerge from rural areas

Takashi Uchiyama

Professor, Graduate School of Social Design Studies,  
Rikkyo University

Against the background of intense global competition, the impetus that will give rise to new, sustainable industries that do not involve fierce competition with imitators will come not from the city, but rather from regional areas. Looking at the current crisis among electronics manufacturers, we realize that technological capacity and financial power are unexpectedly fragile, and corporations can be rapidly overtaken. What ensures the sustainability of an industry is the strength of regional communities and regional networks. Industries which feature relationships of cooperation and mutual support are industries which will manage to weather even very severe situations.

In the city, to work means to be employed; in the country, to work means to create one's own job. This is why we can look precisely to regional areas for the creation of industries. However, realizing success in creating industries requires input from outsiders in addition to the efforts of members of the local community. In the historical sericulture industry in Japan's mountains, people who played the role of "brokers" formed interpersonal relationships, and provided support to ensure that everyone involved in the industry was able to get by even when they suffered a loss. Today, happily, there are many individuals among the nation's retirees who would like to take on similar roles. Despite this fact, to date we have failed to consider engaging the cooperation of these individuals in creating regional industries, and regional areas have suffered for it.

The main impediment to promoting the creation of industries in

Japan's regional areas is the fact that few towns and villages have set out precise orientations for their community development efforts. At present, where regional visions exist, they tend to all be similar, along the lines of "building a vigorous community." This is utterly without appeal. My suggestion is to make use of the ideas of people living in the city and people who have migrated from the city to the country. ■

Professor Uchiyama is a philosopher. Since the 1970s, he has developed his thought through consideration of subjects including the functioning of the Ueno Village community in Gunma Prefecture and Japan's rural culture.

## Ensuring economic circulation in regional areas

Hiroshi Matsubara

Professor, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences,  
The University of Tokyo

The quantitative reductions represented by declines in the populations of small and medium-sized regional cities and sparsely-populated areas will necessarily lead towards a decline in the quality of regional areas. However, some elements, such as inspiration and ideas, are not affected by quantitative changes. If these elements could be linked to the resources of nature, history and culture possessed by Japan's regional areas, the economies of those regions would be sufficiently self-sustaining. For example, it can be argued that isolated regions are superior from the perspective of artistic fields such as music, film and fine art, which utilize individual sensibility as their basic material.

The rediscovery and further enhancement of regional resources is the key to invigorating regional economies. Resources will necessarily be limited in individual small regions, and external cooperation will therefore be essential. Yufuin in Oita Prefecture provides a good example of supplementing elements that do not exist in a specific region by means of cooperation. Originally an ordinary hot spring resort, Yufuin succeeded in boosting its economy by skillfully incorporating a "flow of knowledge" made up of the memories, hopes and opinions of large numbers of people who believed in and supported the town from afar. This flow of knowledge became a regional resource, and the invigoration of the town's economy resulting from the use of this resource is ongoing.

If a regional municipality begins to consider the establishment of links outside the region, it will need to move beyond the concept of strengthening intra-regional circulation, for example through local production for local consumption, to examine how the circulation of goods, money and people in its own region is linked with areas and entities outside the region. This will entail gaining an objective understanding of factors including the status of the industrial sectors that drive the regional economy, the status of competition in manufacturing and the distribution of manufacturing, and human movement within and outside the region and the transport systems that support it. Up to the present, discussion has focused on factors operating within regions themselves; in future, it will be important to address the policy issue of invigorating regional economies by shifting the focus to also take in relationships with extra-regional elements. ■

Professor Matsubara writes and conducts research in the areas of the location of industry and regional economics, specializing in economic geography, urban geography, and German area studies.

## Bequeathing quality regional lifestyles to future generations

Sarah Marie Cummings

President, Bunkajigyobu Company

Traditional culture is strongly rooted in Japan's regional areas, for example in activities such as sake making and crafts that have a basis in tradition, in traditional streetscapes, and in unique regional dishes. These assets differ from those of the U.S., which does not have such an extended history as a nation. The Japanese are said to be good at imitation and lacking in originality, but in fact they possess tremendous originality. The Japanese should recognize the appeal of this culture and make use of it to the greatest possible extent.

Community development initiatives are conducted, first and foremost, for the benefit of the residents of a specific area, and they emerge from the impulse to protect the lifestyle that has been handed down in that area. The valuable aspects of Japan's regional areas, which are not to be found in the cities, have been born from living together with nature. A sustainable lifestyle in which one works the earth and raises food for oneself is a relaxed and attractive lifestyle. A simple lifestyle in which one is able to keep one's feet on the ground and bring up strong and healthy children. The wisdom that has been cultivated in Japan's traditional regional

areas and their magnificent natural environments must be preserved for children who will follow us in 50 or a 100 years' time.

Cultural stimulation improves the quality of life in regional areas. Katsushika Hokusai, the famous ukiyo-e master, spent time in Obuse in Nagano Prefecture in his last years, and left a large number of works there. It is not enough to simply exhibit these in a museum. We worked to hold the International Hokusai Conference in Obuse because we felt that it was important to connect the town to the trend towards Hokusai research taking off throughout the world. In these days of the Internet and social networks, it has become a simple matter to establish businesses based on the same type of perspective. We are not aiming to transiently attract large numbers of sightseers, but rather to be, as a cultural center, the site of high-quality cultural exchanges with a goal and a purpose. ■

Ms. Cummings is a central figure in efforts to revitalize the town of Obuse in Nagano Prefecture. Presently based in Nagano City, she is involved in an ongoing project to realize a sustainable agriculture.

This is a translation of a paper originally published in Japanese. NIRA bears full responsibility for the translation presented here.

### About this Issue

## Population Decline and the Strengths of Regional Areas

This issue of *MyVision* takes up the theme of Japan's regional areas. "Regional" here refers to cities, towns and villages outside the Tokyo metropolitan area with populations of no more than 50,000, which will experience a rapid decline in population in the future.

The decline of Japan's regional areas is much discussed, but we really should be talking about the nature of the relationship between the nation's regions and its cities. Japan's modernization was able to proceed at unparalleled speed due to the smooth functioning of the division of roles between its regional areas and its cities. Regional areas supplied young people as workers for companies in the cities, while the consequent decline in the labor force in the regions was supplemented by mechanization, enabling them to play a role as suppliers of agricultural products. This division of roles supported an efficient society.

However, with the ending of the nation's period of high economic growth, a shift occurred from a mindset that sought efficiency in the form of speed, economy, and convenience, to a diversified sense of value that focuses on the meaning, resonance, and individual fit of goods and services. In this diversified society, the role of rural areas will differ from the role they fulfilled in Japan's period of high economic growth. We must consider a new allocation of roles between the country and the city.

The experts interviewed in this issue sketch a new division of roles between country and city, providing a wealth of suggestions in the process. The new allocation of roles suggested above will be born from a focus on the advantages offered by regional areas.

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