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Entrusting the Future of Rural Society through Nurturing Civic Pride: Endeavors in Gojome Town, Akita Prefecture of Japan

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Abstract

This photo essay illustrates a study on endeavors in a rural Japanese town with a declining population and discusses the future of rural society from a perspective of civic pride as well as sustainability. The population of the town of Gojome, located in Akita Prefecture of northern Japan, has halved from 20,025 in 1960 to 9,481 in 2015. Depopulation is often perceived as a half-empty glass, but we approached our study with the view that it is half-full. We discuss the issue through appreciative approaches by adopting the concept of “civic pride” as an alternative lens based on our empirical survey. The methodology adopted for this field survey include individual interviews with 126 respondents (consisting of 79 residents of Gojome and 47 individuals who were visiting the town) across different generations, 15 key informant interviews, drawings of their pride about the town by 34 sixth-graders of Gojome Elementary School, and observations. It was found that various generations of proud Gojome locals and non-locals have started to proactively participate in the process of bettering the town through various social, cultural, economic, and environmental activities. Based on our learning in Gojome town we conclude that, in the wake of rural depopulation, nurturing “civic pride” could potentially contribute to rural sustainability through entrusting the future of rural society to next generations.

Author's Note

Rural depopulation, often perceived as a negative phenomenon, is believed to increase in the near future in various countries worldwide, with Japan currently in the lead. As a group of graduate students from The University of Tokyo's Graduate

Program in Sustainability Science - Global Leadership Initiative (GPSS-GLI), we traveled to Akita Prefecture in search of possible approaches to the challenges facing rural sustainability in aging societies. Upon arrival in the town of Gojome, we conducted our fieldwork from the 23rd to 30th of January 2016. Presented in this article is a discussion of our research into the ongoing challenges to the sustainability of this aging Japanese rural town and the potential of civic pride to address such challenges. Inspired by the endeavors of Gojome locals, we hope our findings will further support the future of rural sustainability in various regions around the world.

Keywords: Rural depopulation, Civic pride, Sustainable development, Rural Sustainability, Akita, Japan

Context: Gojome, Depopulation and Civic Pride

From *washoku* traditional Japanese cuisine to *shinkansen* bullet trains, Japan has been a world leader in culinary delights and advanced technology; yet, it is also a world leader in declining rural populations. As graduate students of sustainability science at The University of Tokyo, we ventured into the rural town of Gojome in early 2016 to learn more about rural depopulation. We conducted field research comprised of individual interviews with 126 respondents. These consisted of 79 residents of Gojome and 47 individuals who were visiting Gojome, each across different generations. This study also interviewed 15 key informants, analyzed drawings by 34 sixth graders of Gojome Elementary School which described their pride about the town, and drew on observations.

Figure 1: Share Village covered in a blanket of fresh snow during the winter



Source: Author's own.

Located in Akita Prefecture of northern Japan, the town of Gojome has been shrinking in population for decades. According to national censuses, the population reached its peak in 1960 and has halved in the past 55 years—from 20,025 in 1960 to

9,481 in 2015 (Statistic Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, 1961 and 2016). The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2013) foresees that it will further drop to 4,991 by the year 2040. In recent decades, rural depopulation has become common in Japan mainly due to declining birthrates and out-migration from rural to urban areas, particularly among the young generation seeking education or employment opportunities, which has consequently resulted in the era of an aging society. Today Japan has the highest proportion of population over 65 years old in the world, with the national average at 26.7% and that of Akita Prefecture at 33.9%, the highest among all 47 prefectures (Statistic Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan, 2016). Such a trend is significant in Gojome, as the elderly proportion of the population has reached 42.8% (Akita Prefecture, 2015). Evident in Japan's rural communities today are critical issues including a declining labor force, reduced tax revenue, increase in abandoned houses, diminishing traditional cultures, and lower community vitality. These issues have also contributed to accelerating the decline of the rural Japanese population. According to the United Nations (2018), the trend of rural depopulation reflects globally as the urban population of the world has grown rapidly from 751 million in 1950 to 4.2 billion in 2018 and it is expected that the proportion of the world's population living in urban areas will increase from 55% in 2018 to 68% by 2050. Furthermore, the percentage of persons aged 65 years and over is projected to increase from 8.5% in 2015 to 17% in 2050 worldwide (He et al., 2016).

Due to the anticipated decline in the population of future generations with their increased personal and social burdens, rural depopulation is commonly considered to have significant negative implications for sustainable development, where critical emphasis is on the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Not surprisingly, depopulation therefore poses a serious challenge to key concepts of sustainable development, especially in the creation of intergenerational ties. As a consequence, passing down cultural values and local knowledge related to environmental practices such as agricultural practices and forest resource management are becoming ever more difficult, particularly in rural communities. Moreover, out-migration from rural to urban areas potentially increases the adverse environmental effects of urbanization, which include but are not limited to air pollution, increased hazards such as flash flooding, and other climate impacts (World Meteorological Organization, 2018). From the perspective of promoting sustainable rural development and mitigating possible adverse effects in urban areas, rural depopulation is a fundamental matter that needs to be addressed.

The Government of Japan has recognized and started addressing the issues of depopulation on a national scale as early as the 1950s through the enactment of various relevant laws (Kakiuchi & Hasegawa, 1979). Following some specific laws

focused on particular dimensions of depopulation, the Emergency Act for the Improvement of Depopulated Areas (*Kaso chiiki taisaku kinkyu sochi-ho*) was passed in 1970 as the first comprehensive legislation to address the issues of depopulation directly through substantial funds (*ibid.*). Another example is the unique government-led grassroots initiative called “Supporters of Regional Revitalization” (*Chiiki-okoshi Kyouryoku-tai*) where “supporters”, mostly in their 20s or 30s, have been recruited and dispatched to rural communities for promoting local products and facilitating other regional revitalization activities since 2009. Furthermore, the Regional Revitalization Act (*Chibo sosei-ho*) was launched in 2014 to promote revitalization processes at the personal, community, and corporate levels. While there have been some concrete outcomes through various legal measures with human and financial resources, the population in rural Japan has continued to decline in the last half century.

Rural depopulation could be perceived as a half-empty glass, but we decided to view it as a glass half-full — full of strengths and possibilities that could contribute to community vitality. Bearing this in mind, we consider the role of “pride” as a potential actor to reveal these strengths and possibilities which can take shape in the forms of perspectives and endeavors. After our survey, we revisited a wide range of literature and eventually the concept of “civic pride” emerged as a key word (e.g., Wood 2006, Ito & Shimuta 2008, Ihnen 2013, Collins 2016). Originating in 19th century England, this concept includes elements of a) pride about a community; b) proactive participation in endeavors towards the betterment of the community; and c) a sense of attachment to the community held by anyone, either local or non-local (Ito & Shimuta 2008). In the case of Gojome, their Charter, launched in 1985, suggests that residents be proud of their town, entrust their traditions to future generations, and contribute to a creative and affluent community. The mission statement of the comprehensive development plan of Gojome 2012-2021 (2012) also addresses the significance of having new “vitality” and “pride” for promoting sustainable development through a set of specific measures. During our visit, we witnessed various concrete initiatives which are deeply connected with civic pride. Through stories generously shared by locals, young and old, we grew to understand how nurturing civic pride can be a key factor contributing to the sustainability of Gojome.

Local Specialties and Unique Initiatives of Gojome

Via our intergenerational surveys during our one-week stay in Gojome, we discovered that this rural town is endowed with local specialties and unique initiatives that serve as sources of civic pride. When asked, “What are you proud of in Gojome?”, locals and visitors from neighboring towns frequently mentioned

Gojome’s beautiful natural landscapes and the local *sake* rice wine and *damako nabe* hotpot, both of which are made from locally sourced rice. During our visit to Gojome Elementary School, 6th grade students presented their wide range of answers to our question in the form of drawings; surprisingly — or not — many of them drew bottles of *sake*. Many students also drew pictures of Gojome Morning Market, a traditional platform for local commercial activities that was established over 520 years ago.

The uniqueness of the Gojome Morning Market lies not only in its history, but also in its value as a place for social interactions among and between both customers and shop owners. Thus, both Gojome locals and non-locals have a strong sense of attachment to this Morning Market. Similarly, Gojome’s “Share Village” is a new initiative where members can become a “villager” wherever they may live through paid membership. The number of “villagers” has reached 1,215 as of January 2016—within less than five years after it was launched. Membership enables villagers to stay at a historically preserved 135-year-old traditional Japanese house in Gojome and to participate in social interactions such as get-togethers and meetings to discuss topics like the future of rural societies (Share Village 2017). These activities have been forging a sense of belonging in this “village” and Gojome, although they do not necessarily live there physically, in order to promote a “community” of like-minded people who are connected to Gojome.

Figure 2: Some of drawings by Gojome Elementary School students: “What I am proud of about our town Gojome”.



Source: Author's own.

Perspectives and Endeavors by an Entrepreneur in Gojome

In an interview with Mr. Yozaemon Hatazawa, the then-68-year-old founder of a local agriculture and forestry corporation named “Agri”, he said, “My generation created the issue of depopulation in rural Japan.” According to him, his generation known as baby-boomers born between 1947 and 1949 lived through Japan’s rapid economic growth, which created a high demand for workforce in urban areas. This resulted in a shift to academic meritocracy, where people believed that higher education and subsequent employment in urban areas was preferable. This meant, in his words, “a better life with higher and stable salaries” compared to rural areas. Mr. Hatazawa explained that many parents, including himself, fostered this belief by encouraging their children to migrate from rural to urban areas, particularly Tokyo.

Despite ongoing rapid depopulation, Mr. Hatazawa maintains his pride in Gojome’s beautifully rich natural landscape. However, he believes such scenic beauty and natural assets have not been fully appreciated by the local people; and such apathy, coupled with a lack of economic opportunities, has accelerated the depopulation of Gojome. Determined to change this, he has been making vigorous efforts through his corporation by promoting agriculture, preserving beautiful sceneries of paddy fields, and creating employment opportunities for various generations ranging from the youth to the elders (Agri 2018).

Furthermore, he believes that the much younger generation of kindergarten and elementary school students are key to sustaining the future of Gojome. With this belief, Mr. Hatazawa organizes numerous environmental education activities for children to get hands-on experience to foster nature connectedness through harvesting agricultural produce and by touching and feeling the soil, water, and snow. He believes that civic pride can be nurtured from positive memories developed at a tender age, which could greatly impact the long-term formulation of local people’s perceptions about their hometown. This may help inspire a deeper and longer-lasting relationship with Gojome, which could be a key determinant in how they decide to contribute to their hometown in the future.

Figure 3: Mr. Hatazawa teaching children how to plant rice



Source: Cosaque Gojome Facebook Page.

Transforming Perspectives through Learning and Endeavors by Senior High School Students

In an effort to learn more about Gojome, the “Gojome Social Lab” was established in 2015 at the only high school in town with support from their teachers, in addition to advisors from both the Gojome Town Council and The University of Tokyo. The Gojome Social Lab provides local students with opportunities to learn about the history and geography of Gojome through fieldwork, mainly by conducting interviews with local residents about certain topics. We had a chance to meet six of the seven high school student members, four of whom are locals and two from a neighboring city. The members explained that they had selected two particular research topics about Gojome, “traditional festivals” and “energy”. Many of them admitted that they were not interested in Gojome much before starting their research projects. Some members even used to think that Gojome would cease to exist in the future. However, the more they learned, the more they developed an interest in Gojome.

Through proactive participation in various local festivals, the students gained deeper insight into the spirit of Gojome, nurturing a desire to preserve the town and its traditions. One female member further asserted that although she had thought about leaving the prefecture after graduating from high school, she had begun to consider remaining in Akita. Other members plan to study outside of Akita but wish to return home for work. As they regard the “Gojome Social Lab” as a good learning opportunity for deepening their understanding of and nurturing their pride for Gojome, they now wish to engage other fellow students in the same quest. One member even said, “I want to hand over all the wonderful things in town to future high school students”.

The Potential of Civic Pride in Contributing to Rural Sustainability

Various generations of proud Gojome locals and non-locals have started to proactively participate in the process of bettering the town. These efforts include providing educational opportunities such as the Gojome Social Lab and Mr. Hatazawa’s environmental activities for kids, supporting local festivals, or joining Share Village, all of which support the creation of intergenerational ties and the teachings of local cultural values. Gojome locals like Mr. Hatazawa and the Gojome Social Lab members have decided to entrust their beloved town to “future generations” through nurturing civic pride. While it may be difficult to halt the trend of rapid depopulation in rural societies, endeavors in Gojome exemplify the potential of civic pride to contribute to enhancing community vitality, one of many key issues in rural sustainability. In time, the outcomes of the endeavors in Gojome will demonstrate the type of contributions that civic pride can produce.

The issue of rural depopulation may be a result of various social changes at local, national, and global levels, but examples such as Gojome serve as a reminder that vibrant communities can still be achieved through determination, interaction among people, and connections with social, economic, and environmental potentials. Civic pride has certainly unveiled its potential in the numerous efforts for promoting sustainable rural development in Gojome and could potentially be applied in other communities. Whether or not civic pride will yield sustainable results, it has undeniably inspired the people of Gojome to work hard for the betterment of the town they know and love so that future generations may have an inheritance worth protecting themselves. Fostering civic pride may just be that first step towards creating a sustainable rural society.

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