



**UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU**

**“We Will Establish a Virtuous Cycle in Which Jobs
Attract People and People Attract Jobs”:
Analysis of
Abe Administration’s Regional Revitalization
Documents from 2014 to 2020**

East Asian Studies/ Faculty of Social Sciences

Master's thesis

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In 2012, the re-elected Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and his administration faced the harsh truth: Japan's regional economies were struggling because of overconcentration of people and services in metropolitan areas, population was in crisis due to declining birth rate, the Japanese work culture needed to be reformed and the emergence of new lifestyles demanded better work-life balance. To battle this situation Abe launched the Headquarters for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs in 2014 and introduced *Chihō sōsei*, regional revitalization, which would become one of his flagship policies for the next 6 years.

This thesis analysed the policies about revitalizing the rural areas in Japan and aimed to understand how Abe's administration attempted to prevent the rural regions from hollowing out. The documents were analysed from the perspective of work related issues. Japanese work culture and work style reform are in the center of regional revitalization: available jobs attract people to an area and where there are people there will be more jobs. Literature argues that without work reforms Japan will not be able to correct its birth rate that is in downward spiral. This will lead to significantly smaller population that needs to take care of the large population of over 65-year-olds in the future. Furthermore, Japan needs to acknowledge women as an equally important workforce as men.

The purpose of this study was to find out what themes emerge from the 9 selected regional revitalization policy papers from 2014 to 2020 and how work was described in these documents. I chose work related terms and conducted a content analysis on the excerpts that talked about these terms. I discussed the findings by gathering them in groups around five central themes found in the documents. As this study shows, the themes include women, gender roles, death from overwork, diverse lifestyles and rural nostalgia. The focus of reforms was often on women which is understandable since Japanese work culture has always been male dominated. Empowering women and enabling better work-life balance for women as well as addressing the conservative attitudes and expectations on women that are still strongly embedded in Japanese society are the key points of discussion on work.

What I found out was that concrete actions were scarce compared to the government's reassurances of how much they wanted to make positive change in the Japanese society. Also, since women's situation was largely covered I expected there to be more detailed information about young people's situation in work life as well, but this was missing from the documents. Women continue to be attracted to big cities more than men. Although the idea about rural areas feels inviting and nostalgic to many, it became evident from the policy documents that people also see rural areas as conservative and narrow-minded places. Although the government understands that excessive working hours are not beneficial it is difficult to change this part of the Japanese work culture. Furthermore, government wished to make telework an essential part of Japanese work culture but telework is not always possible because of Japanese SME's reluctance to change their traditional work style and the lack of high-speed internet across the country.

Key words: Japan, Shinzō Abe, Chihō sōsei, regional revitalization, work style reform.

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1 Introduction

The fast urbanization process has brought about many issues in Japanese society. Since the percentage of urban population started increasing in the late 1950s, the movement from rural to urban areas has grown faster and faster. In 1960s the urban population was 63 percent and in 2010s it had reached 91 percent. Currently around 92 percent of Japan's population lives in urban areas (The World Bank, 2018). Japan's population peaked in 2008 and the government has been struggling to raise the birth rate with little to no success. The future seems grim since the population is expected to decrease by over 40 million in the next 40 years (Matanle, 2014). Japan's population ages fast, and in the future, there will be more elderly people and less young people to take care of them. The demographic crisis, countryside hollowing out and the urgent need to reform Japanese work style as well as traditional attitudes about women and men's roles have been on the list of topics for Prime Minister's office throughout 2010s. Together these topics form regional revitalization policies.

The future of rural Japan is uncertain largely because of the central government's relationship with these areas (Rausch, 2008). The central government directed most of the economic and political functions as well as societal progress in metropolitan areas in the latter part of 20th century: from the post-war period in the late 1940s and early 1950s, during the economic miracle of 1960s and 1970s and the economic stagnation in 1990s. Only then the government began to realize the negative effects in the rural areas. They realized that "progress in the centre does not automatically result in progress everywhere else" and that "lack of progress elsewhere ultimately compromises the power of the centre to generate progress anywhere" (Rausch, 2008, p. 223-224).

In 1996, 10 years before Shinzō Abe was first elected as Prime Minister in 2006, Prime Minister Ryūtarō Hashimoto tried to reform the agricultural, forestry, and fisheries industries to make them more attractive professions that various kinds of people wished to pursue. Also, life in rural villages were portrayed as restful places where people could live with a peace of mind. Worry about older population growing larger and younger population growing smaller was very much present in 1996. Government promoted women's active participation in society and sought to provide better child-care support and child-care facilities. Gender roles were acknowledged as a hindering factor in work life already in the late 1990s (MOFA, 1996).

After that several Prime Ministers have raised demographic crisis, overconcentration in Tokyo area, equality between men and women and struggling regional economies on their list of agendas. Keizō Obuchi attempted to decrease the pressure on Tokyo metropolitan area and disperse power in local governments (MOFA, 1998). Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori talked about rebuilding social welfare system since there will be greater burden of supporting elderly in the future (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2001). He wanted to respond to the falling birth rate by revising the laws that concerned workers taking care of children and/or family members: it was important to facilitate a society where couples can have children and continue working (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2001). Prime Minister Mori had gender equality as one his main goals and he aimed to provide more opportunities for women who have “important role bearing children”, and for families to achieve balance between work and life (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2001). Prime Minister Junichirō Koizumi focused more on other pressing matters than regional revitalization, but some of his domestic topics included regional stimulation, approaches for local autonomy and originality, and building a society where people can feel the joy of raising children and working (Cabinet Office Government of Japan, 2005). As we can see, the themes that are at the centre of regional revitalization policies have been around for many years before Prime Minister Abe’s re-election in 2012. However, he was the one who branded them under the concept of regional revitalization.

This thesis will familiarize the reader with the urbanization process that is taking place in developed nations globally, what kind of negative impact it has on these societies and what the situation is especially in Japan. With this background in mind, the purpose of this thesis is to understand the nature of work-life spectrum in Japan by delving into the regional revitalization policies that the government has formed to battle the negative impact of the urbanization process. While research about urbanization in Japan has been done before, there is very limited amount of research in English about the regional revitalization policy papers that were chosen for this thesis.

Research Questions and Thesis Structure

This thesis aims to answer these research questions:

- 1) What are the main themes in Abe Administration’s Regional Revitalization documents?

2) How work related challenges are identified in the policy documents?

- a. What topics are prioritised?
- b. What kind of solutions are provided?

Government strives to revitalize regions outside urban areas and making work possible outside of Tokyo, Osaka and other big cities is essential in making people to migrate to these areas. That is why the policy papers are viewed from the work related issues point of view. Everyday work conditions form the basis for people's lives. If working at and from remote areas is not possible the declining birth rate cannot be tackled. Traditional work styles have turned out to be a major hurdle in raising Japan's birth rate. Realizing new work styles that consider both women and elderly as an important part of Japanese workforce will become even more important in the future as the population decreases (Takao, 2021).

The next chapter talks about methods and key concepts. The chapter 3 will introduce the theoretical framework that forms the backbone of this thesis. The theory will familiarize the reader with the urbanization process, demographic crisis, Japanese work culture – especially the fixed gender roles of women and men - and regional revitalization in Japan during Abe's administration. While the focus of this thesis is regional revitalization efforts during Prime Minister Abe's administration from 2014 to 2020, it is important to understand the events that lead to the emergence of regional revitalization policies in 2014. Chapters 4 and 5 will go through the actual analysis and results derived from the secondary and primary data. In chapter 6 I will draw conclusions based on theory and findings in the analysis.

2 Methods and Data

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the research decisions in collecting the primary data and the qualitative research design that was selected to conduct this study. This chapter will also provide preliminary information of the empirical data that will receive more attention in chapter 4 Analysis.

According to Cardno (2018) government policies can be studied from three aspects: context, text and consequences. As policy context is connected to the socio-political environment it is important to understand the issues and the background that gave rise to the policy in the first place. This thesis focuses on the text and the overall contents of the policy papers: what are the main themes and what is said about them? Next, I will introduce the data analysis methods that I used in this thesis.

Document Analysis as a Method

To form a clear idea of the administrative documents' message, qualitative content analysis offered sufficient tools. I chose content analysis because my research question aims to find out *what* the policy papers said about regional revitalization and work. According to Cole (1988) content analysis is a method that is used to analyse written, verbal or visual communication, such as documents. Elo and Kyngäs (2008) noted that content analysis can be used to understand the meaning, context and intentions behind the words and to identify critical processes (Lederman, 1991). What was as important as describing the used words was to describe the latent content which meant things that were not expressed in the data (Cardno, 2018).

Before the documents were scrutinised I needed to establish broad categories which are derived from the experience of going through secondary data and the preliminary skimming of primary data (Bowen, 2009). The next step was to use open coding to organize the data (Cavanagh, 1997). The unit of analysis in this thesis was the work related excerpts.

Content analysis in this case was an efficient method since it used data selection from already existing documents instead of data collection. The data used for this thesis was directly available in the public domain. Compared to other research methods content analysis is usually at little or no cost. The benefit of content analysis argued by Bowen (2009) is that this method has also large coverage: it was possible for me to study the Abe administration

documents from a long span of time, many events, and many settings without having to collect the data for years.

Elo and Kyngäs (2008) pointed out that the sheer quantity of the data can be daunting. While I decided to include quite many documents in my analysis with the average amount of pages per document being approximately 110 pages, I focused on certain units of analysis that had relevance to my research. I chose terms regarding work and read the text around those terms more carefully. These terms are later listed in chapter 4 Analysis. Other parts of the documents I simply skimmed through to have a general idea of the structure and the contents.

The epistemological aspect of this research is closest to abductive. Abduction is needed when researcher encounters surprising and exceptional observations that do not fit existing theories, and therefore the researcher must invent a new theory to suit these observations (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Abductive aspect was the most fitting for this thesis since, as a researcher, I entered the field with already existing expectations of what I would find from the data: theoretical understanding set criteria to what I was initially looking for (Thompson, 2022). Using abductive aspect gave me the freedom to discover more than a singular objective truth: it was possible to find the most logical and useful explanation for phenomena (Thompson, 2022).

The philosophy behind this research is interpretivism. This meant that the reality was observed from my subjective point of view (Nickerson, 2022). This approach suited this qualitative content analysis considerably better than other research philosophies since the content of the primary data was analysed in manner that relied heavily on my subjective interpretations as researcher (Nickerson, 2022). The time horizon was cross sectional because the primary data was from a specific period in time. The primary material was colour coded and gathered in groups according to the analysis chapter's themes.

Primary Data

This thesis analysed Japanese government policy papers regarding *Chihō sōsei* (地方創生 regional revitalization) that were published during Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's administration in his 3rd and 4th terms from 2014 to 2020. Regional revitalization was a strategy that aimed to create a flow of people and resources from urban to rural areas, increase income in rural areas and reform tourism and agricultural industries as well as conduct work style reform to achieve better work-life balance (Finance Bureau, 2020). In 2014, Abe's

administration enacted the Act of Revitalization of Towns, People and Jobs and the Regional Revitalization Headquarters was established.

The primary materials for this thesis were retrieved from the Japanese government's regional revitalization office's webpage. The documents concerning regional revitalization were three types of documents:

- “Comprehensive Strategy (総合戦略, *sōgō senryaku*) for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs”
- “Action Plan (アクションプラン, *akushon puran*) for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” and
- “Long-Term Vision (長期ビジョン, *chōki bijon*) for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs”.

“Comprehensive Strategy for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” (まち・ひと・しごと創生総合戦略, *Machi hito shigoto sōsei sōgō senryaku*, referred to as Comprehensive Strategy from now on) documents from 2014 to 2020 and “Action Plan for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” from 2014 to 2018 were published together annually in December of each year. The cabinet first formulated “Long-Term Vision for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” (referred to as Long-Term Vision from now on) in 2014 when Prime Minister Abe's campaign for regional revitalization started and it was revised at the end of his 5-year plan in 2019. Comprehensive Strategy and Long-Term Vision documents turned out to be more useful for the analysis than Action Plan documents that basically repeated what was already said in the other documents. And despite their name Action Plan documents did not provide concrete proposals for action. That is why Action Plan documents were left out from the analysis. There are total of 9 documents that were included in the analysis. The shortest document was 19 pages long and the longest was 245 pages long.

The parties responsible for compiling the above mentioned documents were the Secretariat of the Council for the Realization of the Digital Garden City National Plan, Cabinet Secretariat (内閣官房デジタル田園都市国家構想実現会議事務局) which took care of the planning and drafting of regional revitalization and comprehensive coordination, and Cabinet Office's Regional Revitalization Promotion Secretariat (内閣府地方創生推進事務局) that operated

laws, budgets and systems related to regional revitalization. I refer to these collectively as Cabinet Secretariat later in the text.

The documents were commissioned by the Prime Minister of Japan’s “Headquarters for the Regional Revitalization” and compiled by the two parties mentioned above, from now on collectively referred to as Cabinet Secretariat.

Year	Comprehensive Strategy	Long-Term Vision
2014	X	X
2015	X	
2016	X	
2017	X	
2018	X	
2019	X	X
2020	X	

Table 1 Documents used in the analysis

The analysis was divided into four chapters: population crisis, struggling regional economies, workstyle reform and work-life balance. While reading the theoretical background, these themes emerged as the most urgent issues for regional revitalization in Japanese society. Each chapter was further divided into three sections that defined the main problems of the theme, goals and solutions. The primary materials were freely available on the internet. Therefore, it was easy to retrieve them once the right website was found. Choosing the right documents was also fairly simple since the ones that were most relevant were often mentioned in articles writing about government’s regional revitalization policies in Japan.

This thesis focused on finding out what the current Japanese work culture is like and how it has changed between 2014 and 2020, by determining how the Japanese government identified work and which topics were highlighted in the above mentioned official policy documents. The terms used for finding the right sections concerning work in the selected documents were:

- 仕事 (*shigoto*) work,
- 働く (*hataraku*) to work and
- 働き方改革 (*hataraki-kata kaikaku*) work style reform.

Other terms picked from the main categories were:

- 過労死 (*karoshi*) death from overwork,
- 空き家 (*akiya*) empty houses,
- 東京圏への一極集中 (*Tōkyō-ken e no ikkyoku shūchū*) overconcentration in the Tokyo area and
- 人口の減少 (*jinkō no genshō*) population decline.

These concepts had an important role to play when talking about work in Japan and I wanted to make sure that whenever they were mentioned in the documents, they were included in the analysis.

3 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I explain the key concepts and the theoretical background of my research. I will start by explaining regional revitalization in Japan and a phenomenon called lifestyle migration. It is also important to understand how Japan, among other developed countries, ended up in the current situation of rural areas hollowing out due to urbanization. We will look at the demographic crisis in Japan, Japanese work culture and how it affects the population decline today.

Since this thesis is largely about the comparison of rural areas versus urban areas, I will give definitions on both so that the reader can understand what exactly is meant by them and how they differ. *Rural* in Japan is defined as:

“In Japan, rural areas refer to all non-urban areas. For policymaking purposes, ‘urban areas’ are defined based on population density and the percentage of densely inhabited districts. Areas that do not meet the population density threshold are rural.” (OECD, 2020).

Urban in Japan is defined as:

“City (*shi*) having 50 000 or more inhabitants with 60 per cent or more of the houses located in the main built-up areas and 60 per cent or more of the population (including their dependants) engaged in manufacturing, trade or other urban type of business. Alternatively, a *shi* having urban facilities and conditions as defined by the prefectural order is considered as urban.” (UN Data, 2005).

3.1 Regional Revitalization in Japan during Abe Administration

Regional revitalization was connected to the Three Arrows strategy (also known as Abenomics) that Abe administration set forth in 2013 (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). The “arrows” were formed with the objective of breaking free of Japan’s economic stagnation that started after the economic bubble burst in the 1990s and continued for 10 years. Later, the 2000s and 2010s were included to the “lost decades” since the economy had still been shrinking. The first “arrow” was aggressive monetary policy, second “arrow” was fiscal consolidation, and the third “arrow” was growth strategy according to which investments by private companies, increasing wages, greater female participation, better childcare service, more scholarships for students and funding for repairing aged infrastructure were encouraged (Yoshino & Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2014). The third “arrow” was the one that included the regional revitalization policies that this thesis observes.

Chihō sōsei (regional revitalization) is a term that Prime Minister Shinzō Abe introduced in the beginning of his third term in 2014 (Finance Bureau, 2022). That also marked the start of a new era for revitalizing rural areas in Japan, fighting the population decline and correcting the overconcentration in Tokyo. Regional revitalization was part of Prime Minister Abe's Local Abenomics, a term that is a combination of Abe and economics. Abenomics aimed for kickstarting the Japanese local economies that are struggling due to investment, work opportunities and human resources flowing into the metropolitan areas. Japan's government boosted regional revitalization strategy since the launching of the Headquarters for Revitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs in 2014 (Finance Bureau, 2022).

In 2014, the Japanese government announced the Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy Act (Matsuura, 2020). This act was designed to slow down the population decline, reinvigorate local economies and spread public awareness of the need for regional revitalization. There were 5 main areas of focus listed in the act. These included creating an environment where people can raise children with a piece of mind, opening the economy and creating value through innovation, opting for society structure where everyone can reach their potential regardless of their age or gender, promotion of regional characteristics and strengths, and creating a secure social base by promoting unique Japanese traditions and culture of each region (Matsuura, 2020). Prime Minister Abe stated that every municipality should act and think autonomously to reform the area for people's needs.

On April 20th, 2016, Abe administration's bill, the Regional Revitalization Law, was enacted by the Diet. The law had three main parts:

1. Government offered subsidies for promoting local revitalization: supporting local governments' voluntary and independent projects was of utmost importance.
2. A tax system was established to support local revitalization: this worked as an incentive for corporations to donate to local revitalization projects conducted by local governments.
3. "Active lifetime town" system: towns' functions were arranged in a way that middle-aged and elderly people could lead a healthy and active life and receive continuous care.

In 10th OECD Rural Development Conference held in 2015 in Memphis, USA, Katsuhiko Yamauchi from Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry & Fisheries presented the direction of

policies regarding regional revitalization in Japan (Yamauchi, 2015). To make people migrate from metropolitan areas to rural areas it was vital to create jobs in rural areas. The government aimed to identify and utilize local resources, promote social businesses, create facilities to increase the value of local products, invite various talented people to local communities, utilize women's power and develop renewable energies. Yamauchi (2015) also pointed out that strengthening networks between communities would enhance community functions to manage local resources. To prevent the disappearance of facilities from local communities, infrastructure improvement was needed for agricultural, forest or fishery production and processing. Community functions were to be enhanced by centralizing social and public services into core area. Also, living conditions needed to be improved for local residents and migrants by construction or renewal of facilities to promote interaction between rural and urban area. The possibilities and values of rural areas were to be promoted, and voluntary supporters were going to be dispatched to experience life in rural areas (Yamauchi, 2015).

3.1.1 Lifestyle Migration in Japan

There is a phenomenon called lifestyle migration that is largely researched in Japan. It is about people's desire to lead different lifestyles in rural areas by abandoning the hectic life of metropolitan areas. The rural environment is associated with working to improve oneself as a person and escaping the hectic urban life (Halfacree, 2014). According to Hoey (2005) lifestyle migrants "seek places of refuge that they call home and that they believe will resonate with idealized visions of self. Life-style migration concerns individuals and families who choose relocation as a way of redefining themselves in the reordering of work, family, and personal priorities." (p. 593). Here Hoey wrote about people's desire to redefine themselves: with this he referred to the underlying notion that the urban life doesn't offer the purpose and freedom in life that many people desire and which they believe was to be found in rural environment.

According to Klien (2015) Japanese were interested in local revitalization. They also wished to contribute to the wellbeing of the rural communities. While they migrated to gain a "lifestyle that makes sense to them personally" (Klien, 2015, p. 97) they wished to contribute to the local community and start their own enterprises to help revitalize the countryside that is hollowing out.

The rural areas have been gaining some popularity in Japan, especially after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 (Nakagawa, 2018). Some began to be suspicious of the impact of nuclear power after the 3/11 disaster and wanted to lead more sustainable lives (Kambe, 2017). Also, as Nakagawa (2018) pointed out, the number of people who prioritized quality of life above income was growing. As Klien (2015) has observed, in Japan it was the young people who were moving to the countryside and one of the greatest reasons for this was the unstable job market. The youth was increasingly reluctant to lead the same lifestyles as their parents and the economic recession made Japanese people challenge their conventional notions of career and personal life (Klien, 2015).

Small rural towns and villages are seen as the original home of Japanese people and many feel pride, affection and nostalgia towards their hometown, *furusato* (古里). The local governments use *furusato* nostalgia as a way to promote the area and attract tourists and new residents reported The Japan Times (Nagata, 2022).

Instead of migrating to rural town, one way of supporting the rural areas is for people to direct some of their annual taxes to a location of their choosing. Local revitalization support tax system, *furusato nozei* (ふるさと納税) that was initiated in 2008, allows taxpayers to give monetary donations to a prefecture, city, town, or village of their choice as reported by The Japan Times (Nagata, 2022). In return, the recipient local government send the donor local goods as a gift — often a local specialty or food unique to the area. According to Living in Japan's article (2021) donors also receive a certificate to be used for a tax deduction and have the amount they donated deducted from their resident taxes the following year.

According to an article on Nippon.com (2020) some believe that COVID-19 pandemic would increase people's interest toward more rural living, but it is hasty to predict the demise of urbanization just yet. Tokyo has experienced many natural and human made catastrophes before which did not stop Tokyo's over concentration. Therefore, it is unlikely that the current situation with the pandemic would have much different effect. In 2020 Prime Minister Abe declared that although the concentration in Tokyo continues the administration was “able to significantly slow its speed.” But the truth is that the net influx to Tokyo metropolitan area in 2019 had doubled since the beginning of Abe administration. The overconcentration will not change since the wages in the capital are about 1.65 times the national average. (Nippon.com, 2020).

Some cases of local revitalization took place in Japan during Abe administration. Organizations with offices in metropolitan areas offered advice and assistance to people planning on migrating to less populous parts of Japan. Local municipalities had different incentives for potential migrants such as free gifts once they move to rural area, grants to help pay for childbirth and children's education, support system for starting an agricultural business or even giving them a free house (Reiher, 2020). According to Klien (2016) young and educated people were migrating to rural areas in search of a different lifestyle. The amount of people in their 20s, 30s and 40s in migration centres have increased in the 2010s (Reiher, 2020). The trend was thought to reflect the collapse of lifetime employment system in Japan. Since employment had become unstable and part-time jobs were increasing, Japanese people found themselves in search of satisfaction from other work and lifestyles than big corporations in metropolitan areas. More people were interested to lead sustainable lives especially after the March 2011 reactor meltdowns. (Klien, 2016).

3.1.2 Emptying of Rural Areas and Abandoned Houses

Finding available home in the countryside is not a problem for people who desire to move to the rural areas. In fact, the increase in vacant houses, *akiya*, has become a serious issue. According to the International Union for Housing Finance, from October 2013, Japan had 60.63 million housing units in total. From these, as many as 8.20 million were vacant (Kobayashi, 2015). In 2018 the number of unoccupied homes was 8.49 million as reported in Nikkei Asia (Hori, 2022). According to Housing Finance International, there were those who thought that before constructing new houses people should utilize the already existing vacant houses (Kobayashi, 2015). The problem was that the highest vacancy rates were observed in regions which were far from Tokyo metropolitan area, and the people who needed houses, especially the young people, faced difficulty in finding employment opportunities in those regions.

However, there have been successful ways of utilizing the vacant houses, for example by turning them into satellite offices for start-up companies (Yoshimoto, 2019). Also, some tech companies have renovated empty houses in several prefectures such as Kamiyama and Chiba (Yoshimoto, 2019). Local governments encourage the revitalization of empty, unused houses and they support 654 satellite offices as of the end of fiscal year 2019, which is before the pandemic even started (Worker's Resort, 2021). Despite these efforts the situation is still grim.

Local municipalities are shrinking because, due to depopulation, many public facilities and shopping centres have been forced to close their doors. Now people have no other option but to travel to areas with shopping centres by bus or train: elderly people are often not able to drive and cannot rely on car transportation anymore (Yui, Kubo & Miyazawa, 2017). *Akiya* negatively affects the residential environment, such as social and economic problems in the area, increases the crime rate, decreases asset value due to a decrease in housing prices and management problems. The negative effects of *akiya* can lead to a massive burden on local governments, such as reduced tax revenues and increased resources for crime prevention (Jeong, & Jeon, 2019). Other types of problems unattended vacant houses can cause in a neighbourhood: they damage the overall landscape and reduce people's desire to buy houses from the area, increases the risk of building collapse and arson and increases health risks due to illegal dumping and parasitic animals (Kanayama & Sadayuki, 2021).

One reason behind the increase in vacant houses is population decline: due to low birth rate and aging population in rural areas there isn't that much demand for existing housing, and vacant houses often occur. Furthermore, according to Jeong and Jeon (2019) the increase in vacant houses appeared steeper in areas where vacant houses were concentrated and tends to spread to the surrounding areas. Another one is shrinking cities, which is one of the biggest causes for the spread of vacant houses, and which is a widespread phenomenon worldwide. It refers to a city in which the population continues to decrease which results in less demand for housing and infrastructure in the area, resulting in an oversupply phenomenon. Shrinking cities are characterized by loss of population but the social and economic problems are more complex than just a decrease of inhabitants (Jeong, & Jeon, 2019).

3.2 Urbanization in Modern Societies

Already in the first years of 20th century some scholars noticed the growth of population around the major cities (Berry, 1976). They speculated that the boundaries between the rural areas around greater urban areas would disappear when the surrounding small towns and villages urbanize. As the cities expanded, metropolitan areas began to form around them. These were called 'suburban towns'. As Drewett, Goddard and Spence (1976) explained, the suburbs became a place to live for those who could not live in the city because of overcrowdedness and higher living costs and for those who did not wish to live in the urban centre but close to it in order to benefit from the economic opportunities. Also, population flow from the urban core to the surrounding towns became a trend during 1960's and 70's. Throughout

the developed countries the urban cores themselves did not gain much population during that time: it was the urbanized areas around them where most of the internal migration focused. As the rings around the cores developed, jobs shifted to the rings alongside with population (Drewett, Goddard & Spence, 1976).

As people pursuing wealthier life for themselves and their families migrated to cities, employment and capital shifted to those areas also. The rural decimated with the lack of job opportunities, low agricultural prices and development of mechanized work (Moch, 1999). Urban work with possibility to advance in career appealed to people. This resulted in considerable loss of inhabitants in rural areas and countryside threatened to hollow out completely (Kytö, Tuorila & Leskinen, 2006). From late 1990's the flow to urban areas has slightly slowed down and rural areas have gained population, but the situation still looks grim. While rural areas lack work opportunities, infrastructure and facilities, urban areas are continuously expanding their cities to provide satisfactory living standards for the large masses. Globally the growth of urban population rose from 33 per cent in 1960 to 54 percent in 2016, much of it focusing in Asian and African continents (Liu & Li, 2017).

The Meiji period (1868-1912) started industrialization in Japan and the industrial growth after WWII has much to do with the swift increase of its urban population. According to Dzienis (2011) at first, the migration flow concentrated to Tokyo and Osaka and the situation remained as such till late 1950's. In 1960's the population began to migrate to the outer zones of the three major urban areas – Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya – and thus, suburbs were formed. The flow to and from urban areas was in balance in the 1970's but in 1980's the influx to urban areas increased again (Dzienis, 2011).

As the flourishing Japanese economy needed more and more people to work in the urban areas, Japan's urban population grew from 64 per cent in 1960 to 76 per cent in 1975, most of the people coming from countryside (Beasley, 2000). At the time people moved mainly to Tokyo area and the cities that spread alongside Pacific coast to the west of the capital. According to Beasley (2000) agricultural production recovered to the prewar levels but began decreasing steadily after this. Out of all the working population, farmers formed 27 per cent in 1960 but only 9 per cent in 1970. As rice was still the largest crop, the Japanese government attempted to help the rice farmers by giving subsidies to them in order to keep their earnings close to factory workers earnings. However, the situation did not turn for much better as the high wages of service sector and manufacturing continued to attract people to the urban areas,

causing more and more farmers to abandon their villages. Furthermore, the men who stayed in villages often worked as part-time farmers because Japan's efficient transport system gave them a possibility to travel to cities for office and factory work (Beasley, 2000).

Different migration patterns began to emerge in the late 1960's that channelled some of the migration flow elsewhere than to the urban areas (Dzienis, 2011). These were for example U-turn, which meant people working in urban areas who decided to move back to rural areas, and I-turn, which is not in fact a turn but refers to the population migrating from cities to countryside (Dzienis, 2011). In 1970's the Japanese government distributed some of the manufacturing jobs outside metropolitan areas to ease their pressure (Beasley, 2000). This resulted in migration turnaround to rural locations.

The three largest metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya were still dominating the migration flow in the first half of 1970's (Dzienis, 2011). The balance of the three metropolitans shifted in 1980's when, according to Nakagawa (2000), Tokyo was the only one of the three that continued to attract people while Osaka and Nagoya's populations remained the same or decreased. Nakagawa (2000) speculates that Tokyo's development as one of the most influential financial centres in the world during 1980's is partly a reason for the in-migration.

In 21st century Japan internal migration has the same characteristics as it had in the 1980's: young people continue to move from rural areas towards urban zones because of economic reasons that create better life such as education and more varied work and social opportunities (Arnold, 2011). In 1950, urban areas accounted for 53 percent of the country's population while in 2020 the figure had risen to 92 percent (Iossifova, 2017).

The negative impact of urbanization started to show in the 1980's and, as mentioned before, at that time the Japanese government became alarmed by the concentration of services and people in the capital and attempted to disperse its functions to other less crowded locations. These actions have had very little effect. Matanle (2014) writes that as the rural areas emptied and continue to empty of young people, these locations lose their vitality and ability to sustain the population when only the elderly remain. While the metropolitan centres are overflowing with people, creating massive social strains, the rural settlements are shrinking. In fact, Japan is experiencing major loss of population everywhere (Matanle, 2014). This leads us to the next point of urbanization process, which is demographic crisis.

3.3 Demographic Crisis in Japan

Japanese are amongst the oldest populations in the world, but they are also one of the healthiest too. The country does not suffer from diseases, wars or violence that would end people's lives in early stages. Infant mortality is also very low and as Japan is one of the wealthiest economies in the world the elderly people can enjoy their retirement years without economic worries (Coulmas, 2007). These characteristics sound like the ideal future for every developing country but Japan among other developed countries is suffering from many demographic changes that urbanization and modernization have brought about. Some of these negative features are hyper-aged society, birth rate decline, shrinking population, trend of late marriage, rising wage gap and pension burden (Matsutani, 2006; Coulmas, 2007).

Ageing of population, low fertility rates – caused by later marriages and delaying or avoiding having children - and increased longevity all have an impact on the emptying of rural areas in developed countries (Arnold, 2011). Japan's population is in static state but, alongside with other developed countries, is expected to be considerably lower in 2050 than it is now. In fact, a loss of many million people will become reality if the current trend continues. In 2022 there are 125,5 million people in Japan (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). Matanle (2014) speculates that the population will decline to 87 million by 2060. Matsutani (2006) suggests even greater decrease in shorter time: by 2050 there will be 85 million people – that means Japan's population will shrink with 40 million. The population decline will affect every part of Japan but unlike the urban, rural locations will suffer the most and some places will experience a complete loss of inhabitants. Matanle (2014) points out that the loss of population on urban areas can even be a positive development since they have been under a huge pressure.

The falling birth-rates in Japan are a result of many aspects and not easily explained but some key factors that Matsutani (2006) and Coulmas (2007) agree on are introduced here. Much of the decline has to do with the Japanese government's mixed messages about encouraging or constraining fertility during the 20th century (Coulmas, 2007). During WWII government encouraged families to have at least five children and banned abortion. After the war, in order to keep birth-rates in control and ensure tolerable living conditions for the population the government campaigned for 'Popularization of Family Planning' and legalized contraception (Coulmas, 2007). They were anxious about the cohort that would be suddenly added to the working population in 1960's which turned out to be unnecessary fear since the rapid

economic growth required large mass of young workers (Matsutani, 2006). This message of family planning and birth control was well received by women who wished to have more than a life at home taking care of children. It was the permission to strive for different kinds of lifestyles and this message stayed in people's minds as the urbanization continued. After that the decline has been constant.

Another reason for falling birth-rates, alongside the Japanese government's family planning campaign, is that many feel it is far too expensive to have children and therefore decide to have only one child, if any. Coulmas (2007) estimated that 14 years of education cost average 5 million to 10 million yen to the family. The competition for good colleges and universities is fierce and many families must invest in private tutoring for the youngsters to have a chance against their peers. Not to mention all the expenses outside school life.

The changing lifestyles are often brought up when discussing about declining birth-rates. Although, this factor is not convenient to operationalize because it is not easy to measure with numbers, lifestyle is an important in understanding the motivations of modern Japanese people (Coulmas, 2007). The collectivist family centred values of first half of 20th century changed to more individualistic during the urbanization in the latter part of 20th century. However, Matsutani (2006) speculated that the individual values that metropolitan areas had produced and which the whole nation had become to express were to face the rise of new values and lifestyles.

As statistics show, an interesting development has taken place in the capital area recently: in 2021, 1,344 more men moved out of Tokyo while 6,777 women moved in. It is evident that the outflow of young women from rural areas to urban centres will lead to a sharper decline in the number of children in rural areas. Women continue to be attracted to big cities to escape the conservative view of gender roles of rural areas while many men are leaving them, thanks to telecommuting. There is also a new demographic trend that showed a drastic change in the net inflow to the capital because of COVID-19: when in 2020 more than 30,000 people moved to Tokyo, only around 5,000 people moved in 2021. It remains to be seen how the situation continues in the years to come. (e-Stat, 2022).

All the factors of demographic crisis are connected to each other: in an aged society more young people are needed to support the elderly but if birth rates decline, there will be less people working and producing wealth for the nation. Furthermore, industrialization causes urbanization that eventually turns into demographic crisis in all developed countries. Due to

urbanization rural locations depopulate and they are no longer developed as much as urban locations.

3.4 Japanese Work Culture

The Japanese work practice that will be presented here is a combination of the old patterns – prevailing small business culture and the ‘Japanese-style’ management model – and changes brought by a new form of capitalism called ‘cultural capitalism’ (Sugimoto, 2021). The ‘Japanese-style’ management system was adored globally in the latter half of 20th century and deemed as the model that every country should follow to achieve the economic miracle. However, in the beginning of 2020s the situation has changed, and the old management model is not desirable anymore. In fact, many see it as the model example of what to avoid.

‘Japanese-style’ Management Model

Characteristic to the ‘Japanese-style’ management system is the guarantee of lifetime employment (終身雇用, *shūshin koyō*) for batch of new graduates that are hired every year (Sugimoto, 2021). These new employees will go through intensive on-the-job training and the company will rotate the employees in different departments to make them multiskilled. When new employees are recruited, they receive a statement of being hired but the contract does not specify their duties. Basically, one employee will work in completely different tasks in different departments, e.g., accounting, sales, and advertising. The employer makes the decision on rotation and employees are rarely consulted on the matter. (Sugimoto, 2021). Sugimoto (2021) pointed out that lifetime employment didn’t concern every employee in Japan: it was only for male white-collar workers in large corporations who enjoyed the safety and benefits of *shūshin koyō*, but it had great ideological impact in Japanese society.

Wages are based on seniority which means that the longer one has worked in the company the bigger their salary is. Furthermore, the more one shows loyalty to the company by working hard and investing large amount of hours at the office for the benefit of the company, the better bonuses they receive. By showing strong allegiance to the company workers might get low-interest company loans to pay for e.g. their house or children’s education. Gaining access to these benefits the workers get tied more firmly to the company. The company is often referred to as ‘family’ to give the idea that the employee should demonstrate similar total commitment at the workplace that they would give to their family at home. (Sugimoto, 2021).

Although the great commitment that Japanese workers have shown has contributed to the achievements of Japanese economy, this has led to some negative consequences. The social costs that exhausted employees suffer include serious health problems such as insomnia, heart diseases and various mental health problems. The excessive amount of hours workers spend at the office plus the required after work dining with the team and the manager, can lead to *karoshi* (death from overwork) in the long run. Heart and brain malfunctions are at the top of the list of causes for death from overwork. Sugimoto (2021) writes that in 2017 there were 190 cases of *karoshi* and some of the victims worked as much as 100 hours per week. *Karoshi* is recognized as a serious issue in Japanese society and the government has revised the legislation in order to prevent employee exploitation. Since the Work Style Reform Act was enacted in 2018 and put into effect in 2019, there has been vast public attention to the potential changes in working hours (Takami, 2019). The current limit for overtime work is 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year. Also, unlike before, now the employer suffers penalties if they break the law. Especially Japanese men are expected to work long hours at the office which makes their share of household chores minimal. Although Japanese workers are entitled up to 20 days of annual paid leave the consumption of the leave is limited. (Sugimoto, 2021).

Sugimoto (2021) wrote that non-regular employees, that either work full-time or part-time, are strongly embedded in Japanese economy which would collapse without them. Japanese urban society has shifted into 24-hour service economy and many students, middle aged women and elderly work in shops as part-time employees. This casualization of employment has turned many workers in their prime working lives into NEETs: young people who are not in education, working or training (Sugimoto, 2021). The freedom that one has over their free time when being a non-regular employee is understandable when the counterpart is possibly *karoshi* in service of demanding company, but it poses problems for the society. While people in their 20s and early 30s do not have stable well-paying jobs they are less likely to get married and have children (Sugimoto, 2021). This of course contributes to the population decline.

National surveys conducted for more than 50 years by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics showed same results even in 2010s: the paternalistic ‘Japanese-style’ management system received strong support. Workers preferred a manager who was excessively demanding but showed interest to employees’ family lives and their health compared to manager who was not too strict and didn’t concern themselves with the workers’ personal lives (Sugimoto,

2021). Japanese would also prefer to work in a company that created the ‘family atmosphere’ with recreational activities, even if their wages were lower.

Cultural Capitalism

Japanese society is experiencing a shift from industrial capitalism to cultural capitalism (Sugimoto, 2021). Japan used to be one of the greatest manufacturers in the world but nowadays its specialty are not the physical goods but knowledge and information. Japanese expertise in software technology, visual media, music, entertainment, and hospitality is superior internationally. Japanese cultural products are the ones that global markets have high demand for. Japanese government acknowledges the impact of Cool Japan and soft power and the current minister appointed in 2022 for matters related to Cool Japan is Naoki Okada (Prime Minister’s Office of Japan, 2023). He is also in charge of Regional Revitalization and Digital Garden City Nation Vision: affairs related to the topic of this thesis.

Since 1980s Japanese consumer behaviour has turned to more diversified patterns and people demand more personalized goods (Sugimoto, 2021). This is the opposite of industrial capitalism that manufactured standardized models for mass consumption. Cultural capitalism employees wish for more mobile, location free working in a corporation that has entrepreneurial and less organized structure. They prefer casual labour and job security is not as vital as before. Rewards are given based on performance. In such environment of individualized and mobile work life, employees have more freedom over their work style. With the emergence of communications technology, workers can work from home or any location without having to commute to the actual company office. There was a remarkable surge in telework from 2016 to 2021: in just 5 years the overall rate of telework increased from 13.3 per cent of employees in 2016 to 27.3 per cent in 2021 (Osawa & Kingston, 2022). Larger firms implemented telework and allured new employees with this new work-life balance that allowed them to get 2 to 3 hours a day free time that otherwise would be spent commuting. However, smaller firms did not have the necessary resources to enable telework and many Japanese households lack high speed internet connection (Osawa & Kingston, 2022).

Sugimoto (2021) wrote that young people are unable to form a clear vision of their work life and it has become increasingly more important to think about long-term career choices and what a good balance between work and family life is like. Younger generations are in a pursuit of their own independence more than before (Sugimoto, 2021).

3.4.1 Women in Japanese Work Culture

Sugimoto (2021) wrote that Japanese work culture for women is predominantly non-regular employment. 56 percent of employed women are non-regular employees while only 21 percent of employed men are non-regular employees. Non-regular employees are both full-time or part-time workers, and their hourly salary is low. It is typical for these workers to stay in their unstable unfair position for years without any means of advancement in their careers. They lack the stability, security and benefits that regular employees' contract ensures them (Sugimoto, 2021).

Japanese women's participation in work life has steadily increased since industrialization as OECD's (2008; 2019; 2021) reports show. Women's role as housewives started to change because of lifestyle choices as well as out of economic needs (Coulmas, 2007). Nowadays it is a norm that both men and women are breadwinners in households. OECD (2008; 2019; 2021) reveals that in 2001 female participation in labour was 60,1 per cent and male participation was 85,0 per cent. The percentage has slightly risen for male participants since the early 2000 being 86,5 per cent in 2020. Female participation has increased with over 12 per cent between 2001 and 2020 and is presenting a quite positive figure. Below is a table showing the labour force percentages according to sexes from 2001 to 2020.

Year	Male (%)	Female (%)
2020	86,5	72,5
2018	86,2	71,3
2017	85,5	69,7
2015	85,0	66,7
2013	84,6	65,0
2011	84,4	63,0
2009	84,8	62,9
2007	85,2	61,9
2005	84,4	60,8
2003	84,6	59,9
2001	85,0	60,1

Table 2 Labour force participation for ages 15-64 by percentage (OECD, 2008; OECD, 2019; 2021)

Despite the positive rise in women's participation, a few major obstacles exist. According to Matsutani (2006) women's interest for work declines between ages of late 20's to early 40's, meaning the years that Japanese women usually have children and raise them. This is because of employers' take on maternity leave. Although women's participation is continuously encouraged the attitudes and social reality pose a contradiction: women are discriminated if they are expected to have children in the near future or they get only short term occupations. The fact that women must carry the child and take maternity leave because of it is creating different employment conditions for men and women (Coulmas, 2007). Women often have fewer chances in career if they wish to have children at some point. This notion is further discouraging child bearing and is another thing that promotes population decline. (Coulmas, 2007).

Furthermore, women earn less than men (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan, 2022). Employees are expected to stay at the office till late in the evening which is not easy for couples with children. It often is women's responsibility to take care of the children and household chores and therefore they have to leave work earlier. This reduces their salary because they do not contribute to the company as much as others. According to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan (2022) more than 50 per cent of women have only temporary contracts an almost 50 per cent are part time workers. This further promotes Japan's gender biased wage gap. It is no wonder if Japanese, and especially the women, are reluctant to have children when they live "under a system where childbearing implies diminished promotion chances, a lower wage and a lengthy interruption in working life" (Coulmas, 2007, p. 54). Because of the discrimination almost 50 percent of the Japanese women stop working completely after they have had children. Women's labour force participation rate by age group is described with an "M-shaped curve", because it shows that when women first get married or give birth they tend to leave the labour force, which creates the dip in the middle of the M-shape. Then women rejoin the labour force after their child has grown and the labour force participation increases again, creating the second peak of the M-shape. (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Japan, 2022).

How the current labour shortage could be changed then? For example, Timonen (2008) and Matsutani (2006) agreed that elderly should be engaged in work life more. Although Japanese tend to work till older age because of small pensions (Moriyama, 2022), the attitude towards

hiring elderly must change - as well as the attitude towards women. Presently it is difficult for anyone in Japan to continue their career after dropping out. Furthermore, the foreign worker policy should be revised so that younger workers could enter Japan and have better opportunities for building career and life there. Nagy (2012) suggested that in order to attract more foreign workers Japan should offer fair selection of Trainee Programmes, consider the special needs of Nikkeijin, enhance job opportunities for foreign students and entertainers, ease the reunion of couples and families in international marriages and make it easier for foreigners to enter Japan and receive longer visas.

3.4.2 Gender Roles and Work

Even today, Japanese society holds on to their traditional gender-based division of labour, childcare support system and representation of women in various field are not sufficient, women in work life are discriminated and rural areas are lagging behind in promoting gender equality (Yamamoto, 2014). Gender roles are rooted in Confucian ideology of group orientation, harmony, and hierarchy: men are devoted to the company and the most important thing is to bring success to it while women take care of the home, children and household chores (Yamamoto, 2014). Although Japan has been acquiring many typically Western features in its society, compared to many Western nations, Japanese women are still far from equality. This is typical especially in the rural areas. Two laws concerning gender equality, female-male participation and agriculture and farming were passed in Japan 1999. These laws included recommendations for promoting gender equality in the farming, forestry and fishing communities (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2011). The laws were meant to encourage females in rural areas to be more entrepreneurial. However, some criticisms against these laws emerged: that the gender equality law places women's unappreciated duties and responsibilities in the spotlight and this may result in social expectations for women to take even more responsibilities (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2011).

Hashimoto and Telfer (2011) wrote that for centuries Japan has held on to traditional attitudes according to which men have traditionally been the head of the household, and all legal documents and the family's wealth has been under the husband's name. Work on the farm has typically been shared equally between husband and wife but domestic responsibilities have fallen mostly on women's shoulders (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2011). While in rural areas this is still the reality, it is important to note that the situation is different from urban centres, where attitudes and roles change much faster.

According to Belarmino and Roberts (2019) Japanese gender roles are especially visible when looking at which employees request vacation: it is harder for men to take time off work than women. As many other researchers have found out (Sugimoto, 2021; Hashimoto & Telfer, 2011; Coulmas, 2007; Matsutani, 2006) is common for women to take maternity leave but it is rare for men to have paternity leave. Belarmino and Roberts (2019) also found out that women are expected to take an inferior role than men within families, work places, school, and treatment by peers and authority figures. As stated before, in modern Japan women are still pressured to fulfil their traditional gender roles: they should get married and have children as well as quit work after having children (Belarmino & Roberts, 2019). While there are projects to encourage women's empowerment in rural areas and women starting their own businesses in rural areas have brought positive results, they have difficulties in balancing societal expectations about their roles in running business and taking care of the children (Traphagan, 2017).

4 Analysis

In the previous chapter we delved into secondary sources that form the theoretical framework of this thesis. In this chapter we move on to the analysis of the primary material. I have named the sub-chapters according to what I analysed to be the central themes in the documents. Every sub-chapter is further divided into sections that present the problems, the goals and the solutions given by the Japanese government. These chapters include the findings made about work related issues in the documents.

4.1 Population Crisis

The first major theme represented in the Abe Administration “Vitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” documents is the ongoing population crisis. This theme includes factors such as Tokyo overconcentration, aging population, less young people and less women in rural areas.

4.1.1 Status quo and problems

All of the Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2020 stated that the outflow of population from rural areas to the Tokyo metropolitan area and consequently creating overconcentration in Tokyo is a major issue. Rural areas are at the forefront of depopulation and declining birth rates. Behind the regional characteristics of many people moving to the Tokyo area are the lack of employment of young people who are about to enter the employment period, the lack of attractive jobs and the fact that local companies are not necessarily recognized as attractive. There are fewer opportunities to choose a rural area as a place of employment since the rural environment is not offering a good balance between work and home life (childcare, nursing care, etc.) and women’s active participation is not seen as a valuable asset.

According to Long-term Vision from 2014 - assuming that population migration to metropolitan areas continues at the current pace - the women aged 20 to 39 who play a central role in population reproduction in metropolitan areas will in fact increase.

The average age when people first get married and the age at which the first child is born are remarkably high in Japan (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017). In metropolitan areas such as the Tokyo area the number of births has been extremely low. The fertility rate varies greatly depending on the region. Late marriage and late childbearing as well as work styles,

income, the loss of marriage opportunities and the economic burden of raising children, which hinder the realization of hopes for marriage, childbirth and childrearing and regional and family supportiveness are factors impacting the declining birth rate.

One of the reasons for the concentration in the Tokyo area is considered to be the fact that there relatively high percentage of people find employment and that large companies are concentrated in Tokyo (Cabinet Office, 2019a). About 36 million people, or about 28% of Japan's total population (2013), live in the three prefectures of Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa (Cabinet Office, 2014b). In 2018 about 37 million people, or about 29% of Japan's total population lived in Tokyo metropolitan area (Cabinet Office, 2019b). In Western countries, the population ratio of the metropolitan area is about 15% (Cabinet Office, 2014b). According to a survey conducted by the Japanese government, young people stated that there are many rewarding jobs in the same company or industry in the Tokyo area, and the growing information and telecommunications companies are concentrated in the Tokyo area (Cabinet Office, 2015). Young people have a good image of Tokyo area which is thought to be one of the factors why so many young people migrate there. In addition to work, young people are also concerned about the living environment and Tokyo offers many opportunities to experience entertainment, leisure, culture, art, etc. and the living environment in the Tokyo area has improved and is easier to live in.

According to Long-term Vision from 2014, in general, there are socioeconomic benefits to population concentration. It enables the existence of various service industries, promotes the exchange of human resources and information, and provides a convenient and comfortable living environment. However, today's Tokyo metropolitan area has problems such as extremely long commuting times, high housing prices, and the shortage of childcare services and elderly care services, which are manifested as a waiting list problem. In addition, due to overconcentration in Tokyo, the risk of increasing damage due to a huge disaster such as an earthquake directly below the capital is increasing. (Cabinet Office, 2014b).

Throughout 2014 till 2020 the Comprehensive Strategy documents stated that there has been a remarkable rise in the employment rate of women in the working-age population, and that the “M-shaped curve” has become shallower than before. However, there are also many women who wish to work but are not currently looking for a job because of childbirth and childcare. In addition, although the percentage of women who continue to work before and after giving birth to their first child is on the rise, there are still a certain number of women who cited the

difficulty of balancing work and childcare as the reason for quitting their jobs after becoming pregnant or giving birth to their youngest child.

Japan's fertility rate has been declining rapidly since the late 1970s, falling below the level at which the population size can be maintained over the long term. The fertility rate was 1.26 in 2005 and then began an upward trend, rising to 1.45 in 2015 (Cabinet Office, 2014b). The number of births in Japan continues to decline, with the total fertility rate standing at 1.42 as of 2018 and 1.36 as of 2019 (Cabinet Office, 2018; 2019a). The progress of the declining birth rate is caused by an increase in the unmarried among the younger generation, an increase in the age at which the first child is born due to the tendency to marry later, a sense of economic burden of marriage, childbirth and child-rearing due to changes in the employment situation, and the difficulty in balancing child-rearing and work. If the young generation's desire to get married and raise children is realized, the fertility rate is expected to improve to a level of around 1.8 (Cabinet Office, 2018). Of course, there are regional differences in the situation of the birth rate.

According to the Long-term Vision from 2014, the population will decrease by about 600,000 people per year in the early 2020s, but it will accelerate to about 1 million people per year around the 2040s. By 2050, the Japanese government expects the population of about half of the residential areas nationwide to decrease by 50 percent or more, and the population decline rate tends to be higher in municipalities with smaller populations. In particular, the population living in municipalities with less than 10,000 people may decrease by about half as of 2015. According to the Institute for Social Workers' Population Projection (2017), if the population continues to decrease at this rate, the total population in 2060 will drop to 92.84 million (Cabinet Office, 2019b). This means a return to the population size of about 70 years ago (1950s). Furthermore, the total population will continue to decline even after it falls below 60 million in 2100 (Cabinet Office, 2019b).

In other words, from 2010 to 2040, the wards of Tokyo will decrease by 6 percent. While most of the cities will experience a population decline of only 15 percent, regional cities with a population of 50,000 or less will experience a rapid population decline of 28 percent, and municipalities in depopulated areas 40 percent. The "first stage" of population decline is not so fast, but in the "second and third stages" a situation called a rapid population decline awaits. (Cabinet Office, 2014b).

In areas where the population is rapidly declining and aging, shops and petrol stations that are essential for daily life are closing. From 2014 to 2019 the Comprehensive Plan documents listed these problems - decrease in the number of people living in the community and the disappearance of facilities – as the factors that make it hard to secure the necessary life services, as well as securing jobs and income in the region. The Comprehensive Strategy documents also mention the increasing number of abandoned farmlands and vacant houses. In many cities, vacant lots and empty houses are occurring, and a phenomenon called *Toshi no suponji-ka* (都市のスポンジ化, "urban spongification", Cabinet Office, 2017) is occurring in which cities become sponges, that reduce the effects to consolidate residential and urban functions in rural areas. Cities attract all investment, human resources and work opportunities, leaving rural areas abandoned.

A survey conducted by Cabinet Office in 2019 showed that a large percentage of respondents think that they need financial leeway in order to get married, and a large percentage of respondents cite the burden of childcare and education costs as a reason for not having the ideal number of children after marriage (Cabinet Office, 2019a). One of the factors behind this sense of economic burden is changes in the employment situation. The proportion of non-regular workers is increasing, and the income distribution of people in their 20s and 30s has shifted to the low-income group over the past 20 years (Cabinet Office, 2019a).

4.1.2 Goals to Create a Virtuous Cycle

Realizing a virtuous cycle was often mentioned in the Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2020. This meant the “creation of jobs” and “creation of people” in the rural areas: jobs attract people into the rural areas and people attract jobs. In order for the younger generation to be able to work in rural areas with peace of mind, it is necessary to provide employment that meets the requirements of reasonable wages, stable employments and rewarding work. The documents state that the efforts that emphasize the quality of employment are especially important in rural areas where the decline in the working population is serious (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018).

In order to establish a virtuous cycle of jobs and people, the Japanese government starts by creating jobs in rural areas. According to the Comprehensive Strategy document from 2014 there were about 100,000 young people under the age of 35 moving to the Tokyo area every year. For those aged 35 and over, there is slight excess of migration to rural areas. In order to

correct the overconcentration in the Tokyo area, it is necessary to eliminate the excess migration of young people to the Tokyo area. That is why the Japanese government aims to connect the 100,000 jobs created each year in rural areas to the migration and settlement of potential applicants wishing to move. The government aims to promote migration from the Tokyo area to rural areas and improve the rural employment rate by creating a new flow of people to rural areas, and establishing a before mentioned virtuous cycle of work and people.

In order to ensure that efforts to improve the ability to create jobs and strengthen the ability to create businesses in these regions lead to the correction of the overconcentration in Tokyo, an accurate support needs to be provided for the potential immigrants in their migration processes (Cabinet Office, 2014a). It is necessary to secure stable and high-quality employment in rural areas. This can be done by partially relocating headquarters' functions from Tokyo Ward to rural areas and by expanding rural employment quotas for companies. Furthermore, if an environment is developed in which people can live and work in rural areas without living in Tokyo, more people, including young people and women, will be able to demonstrate their abilities as leaders of industry and society in rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016). In Comprehensive Strategy document from 2016 the government aimed to increase 7,500 cases in the next 5 years until 2020 for companies to reinforce local bases by relocating part of their head office functions and to increase the number of employees at rural bases by 40,000.

The Comprehensive Plan documents from 2014 to 2018 listed four goals for hilly and mountainous areas where the population decline and aging are remarkable. First, there should be a community living area that is actively developed by the local residents. Second, a sustainable system for solving local issues i.e. the formation of a local management organization should be established. Third, life services that allow people to live in the community should be maintained and secured. Fourth, it is necessary to secure jobs and income in the region.

Since the low birthrate in the Tokyo area is thought to be largely influenced by the working style of the younger generation, such as the problem of working hours. That is why companies in Tokyo metropolitan area are required to take a long-term, socio-economic perspective and work to create a work-life balance and a work environment that facilitates child-rearing. (Cabinet Office, 2016).

Another goal presented in the Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2020 is to create communities that are more conducive to marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing and to achieve a society in which marriage, pregnancy and child-rearing can be done with peace of mind. In addition, Cabinet Secretariat aims at creating high-quality workplaces where young people can work with a piece of mind, raise the rate of those wishing to get married to 80 percent and provide seamless support for marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing as well as work-life balance. Also, the government works to raise the percentage of couples who plan to have children to 95 percent.

4.1.3 Solutions to Tackle the Declining Birth Rate

According to Long-term Vision from 2014, in the past, there was a certain degree of tendency for students to return to their hometowns to find employment even after enrolling at universities in the Tokyo area, but in recent years such U-turns have decreased, while the tendency for graduates of local universities to move to the Tokyo area is increasing (Cabinet Office, 2019b). This trend is particularly noticeable among young women, suggesting the importance of securing attractive workplaces for young women in rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2014b). In the past, when the number of net immigrants to the Tokyo metropolitan area was on the rise, the number of men tended to exceed that of women, but in recent years there has been a tendency for women to outnumber men. In 2013 the number of people who migrated to Tokyo metropolitan area was 96,524 people and in 2018 it was 135,600 people. The biggest age group was 20 to 24 year-olds. (Cabinet Office, 2019b).

To support the migration of 100,000 people per year to the rural areas instead of Tokyo area, in 2015 in collaboration with the National Emigration Promotion Centre, the Cabinet Secretariat established the Regional Job Support Centre to centrally collect and provide employment-related information and information on living in rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2015). In addition, in order to serve as a receiver for UIJ turn¹ in each region, Cabinet Secretariat implements initiatives that use the originality and ingenuity of each region. The Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2020 state that this will be done by circulating human resources to local rural areas.

¹ U: To move to a countryside again after moving to a big city from a countryside

I: To move to a medium-sized city after moving to a big city from a countryside

J: To either move to a big city from a countryside or move to a countryside from a big city (Ochimusya, 2018)

In order to achieve the desired birth rate of 1.8, Cabinet Secretariat will promote a regional approach to addressing the declining birth rate and implement work style reforms in each region (Cabinet Office, 2015). Toward the realization of zero turnover for nursing care, Cabinet Secretariat will institutionalize the City of Lifelong Activity concept that contributes to the construction of a lifelong active society so that the elderly can play an active role in the community.

Comprehensive Strategy from 2015 explained that the situation of the declining birth rate was analysed with a regional approach and the situation of work style is considered to have a large impact on the rate. Cabinet Secretariat created and published the Regional Declining Birth Rate/Work Style Index which is used to find out how each local government's situation regarding the declining birth rate is compared to others. With this indicator Cabinet Secretariat is able to consider effective countermeasures. One countermeasure is to prevent overwork. The Diet submitted a partially revised Labour Standards Act in 2015 which incorporates measures to prevent overwork, such as encouragement to take annual paid leave. In Comprehensive Strategy from 2018 Cabinet Secretariat stated that they would revise and provide the compiled Guidelines for Examining Countermeasures Against the Declining Birth Rate in Local Areas by exchanging information on practical issues of each region.

While the number of births is declining throughout Japan, there are some municipalities that have maintained a relatively high birth rate or have achieved improvements in the number and rate of births. According to the Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2015 and 2016, various factors are contributing to these improvements, such as support and town developments, a good working environment that allows both men and women to balance work and family, and the creation of an environment where children can be born and raised with piece of mind. By conducting surveys and analyses from a wide range of perspectives in these regions, and compiling and disseminating the results, Cabinet secretariat promotes efforts in distributing the findings in practice throughout the nation (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016).

The findings are further discussed in Comprehensive Strategy document from 2019 and they told the following: 1. whether basic measures such as work style reform efforts, child-rearing support, industrial promotion, and urban development are functioning as support for the younger generation, 2. whether elements such as the formation of local communities, awareness by companies about the importance of the younger generation and awareness of local culture and traditions are connected to the development of a community that is easy to

live in and that people can be proud of, and 3. whether communities and companies understand the importance of balancing child-rearing generations and provide necessary support for this. According to the Comprehensive Strategy document from 2018 and 2019 there should be community-wide effort to raise children by providing necessary support.

Based on this, the Children and Child-rearing Headquarters and the Town, People, and Job Revitalization Headquarters will work together to create environment that makes it easier for both men and women to get married, raise children, and work in communities, companies, and society as a whole (Cabinet Office, 2018).

In order to attract people to return to the countryside, Cabinet Secretariat promoted the movement of mainly young people from urban areas to rural depopulated areas. The documents stated that in order to correct the excessive concentration of population in Tokyo, it is necessary to secure stable and high-quality employment in rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016; 2018; 2019a). This will be achieved by public and private sectors working together to strengthen *local bases* and expanding local recruitment by companies, especially by relocating all or part of the head office functions from the 23 wards of Tokyo. In light of the fact that there is a mismatch in the employment of young women in rural areas, and that it has led to the migration of young women to metropolitan areas, the documents state that it is necessary to support companies that promote the employment of women in rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016; 2018; 2019a).

There is a stronger tendency to work in regular employment among women with higher educational backgrounds, and the fact that the ratio of regular employment in the Tokyo metropolitan area is higher than in rural areas is considered to be one of the factors why women migrate there (Cabinet Office, 2020). A survey conducted by Cabinet Secretariat showed that just under 30 percent of women said that there are many jobs in the Tokyo area where women can play an active role (Cabinet Office, 2019a; 2020). That is why creating attractive workplaces in rural areas where women can play an active role is essential.

For this reason, Comprehensive Strategy from 2020 introduced a base of initiatives for women's active participation called the Act on Promotion of Women's Participation and Advancement in the Workplace. Business owners with 101 or more full-time workers are required to disclose information on women's empowerment. In particular, in regions where the excess outflow of young women is regarded as major issue, Cabinet Secretariat works to understand the wishes of young women regarding work and family, and to ensure that the

hopes of young people are reflected in community development. The document pointed out that communities need to work together to change their mind-sets.

In order to promote the return of students from rural areas living in the Tokyo area and establishment of students in the rural areas, Cabinet Secretariat will support the implementation of internships at local rural companies, especially in regions where many young people move to the Tokyo area (Comprehensive Strategy, 2018; 2019). In addition to the promotion of Sousei Internship in industry, government and academia, Cabinet Secretariat will work to spread and strengthen the use of scholarship programs that support rural employment and promote the spread of work locations (Cabinet Office, 2020).

4.2 Struggling Regional Economies

The second major theme represented in the Abe Administration “Vitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” documents is the struggling regional economies. This theme includes factors such as promotion of industries e.g. forestry, fisheries and agriculture, subsidies and tax reliefs to support local revitalization, local economies spiralling down, vacant/abandoned houses, utilization of Big Data and ICT.

4.2.1 Status quo and problems

In 2050, if the population decline continues at the current rate, more than 60 percent of the residential areas currently inhabited will have their populations reduced by more than half, and 20 percent of the areas will become uninhabited (Cabinet Office, 2014b). It is estimated that, in depopulated areas, the most important issue in maintaining the entire area, including the surrounding villages, is how to secure the essential daily life services, such as shopping and medical help, for the local residents. The impact on cities is also large. A certain population size is required to maintain urban functions. There is a risk that the service industry that supports urban functions will cease to exist. This would significantly reduce employment opportunities and the tertiary sector in the area. If that happens, the outflow of young people will continue, accelerating the decline of rural areas. In this way, population decline will have a tremendous impact on local economies and societies. (Cabinet Office, 2014b).

In 2016 the number of volunteers for regional revitalization was 4,090 (of which 112 were working in the rural areas), an increase of approximately 4.2 times compared to 2013 (Cabinet

Office, 2016). Furthermore, in 2017 the number of volunteers for regional revitalization was 4,976 (of which 146 were working in the rural areas), an increase of approximately 5.1 times compared to 2013 (Cabinet Office, 2017). They are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fisheries, and carry out regional cooperation such as living support for residents.

Approximately 60 percent of the members continued to live in the same area even after their term ended, and settled in the same municipality and about 30% of the volunteers have created new jobs in the region, such as starting their own businesses.

Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2017, 2018 and 2019 point out that there are regional resources such as vacant houses and closed schools. The earning power of the region decreases while these buildings stand idle. Furthermore, the number of vacant houses is increasing as the number of households decreases, and the market for existing housing distribution and renovation is sluggish. The proportion of long-term vacant houses that have no plans to rent or sell is increasing, and some vacant houses are required to be removed because of aging and danger.

Regarding urban revitalization, the Comprehensive Strategy document from 2020 states that there are areas where convenience and traffic utilization rates have been improved. In addition, Cabinet Secretariat has set goals such as improving the attractiveness of the region, and there are some areas that have improved their attractiveness by promoting the development of facilities for intergenerational exchange, the invitation of universities using abandoned school buildings, and the use of parks and idle public facilities by the private sector.

Comprehensive Strategy from 2018 states that compared to before the start of the second Abe Cabinet, the unemployment rate has improved in all prefectures, and the active job openings-to-applicants ratio has exceeded 1 in all prefectures for the first time in history. The document points out that employment and income environment continues to improve, with per capita wages rising in all prefectures. However, Comprehensive Strategy from 2019 presents interesting figures regarding the progression of per capita wages. The changes in the salary amount in each prefecture from 2015 to 2018 varies depending on the region. Several prefectures such as Shimane, Yamanashi, Tokushima, Gunma, Kyoto and Kagoshima are on a gradual downward trend.

As the population ages further in the future, the stagnation of labour supply may constrain the growth of regional economies. In addition, SMEs, which account for the majority in rural

areas, are facing a labour shortage compared to large companies (Cabinet Office, 2018). However, Comprehensive Strategy from 2019 states that even as the working-age population continues to decline, the number of workers is on the rise. As of 2018, the number of workers was 66.64 million, an increase of 2.63 million compared to 2015. Behind this increase in the number of employed people is thought to be the social advancement of women and the elderly. In fact, as of 2018, 69.6 percent of the female population aged 15 to 64 was employed (increase of 5.0 points from 2010), and 24.3 percent of the elderly population aged 65 and over was employed (increase of 2.6 points from 2010) (Cabinet Office, 2019a).

There is a high risk of falling into a negative spiral in which population decline leads to a contraction of the regional economy, and the contraction of the regional economy accelerates the population decline (Cabinet Office, 2019b). And if the rural areas continue to weaken, it is inevitable that the large cities - which have continued to receive an influx of human resources from the rural areas - will eventually decline as well and their competitiveness will weaken (Cabinet Office, 2018).

The spread of COVID-19 infection has had a tremendous impact on Japan's regional economies, and at the same time, there has been a growing interest in moving to rural areas, and new ways of working such as telework have emerged (Cabinet Office, 2020). The virus sparked new ways of thinking and working that lead to the flow of people and jobs to rural areas. The Comprehensive Strategy document from 2020 states that the virus brought about a change in people's awareness and behaviour.

4.2.2 Goals for the Regional Economies

Cabinet Secretariat will focus on securing and improving the quality of employment, such as improving the vitality and productivity of service industries that are rooted in rural communities, and responding to economic conditions and fluctuation of employment mismatches (Cabinet Office, 2014a). To salvage the struggling local economies, Cabinet Secretariat will work to strengthen the competitiveness of local industries with the aim of creating new employment through the creation of new jobs. Specifically, through regional economic analysis using big data, they will identify businesses and industries that have strengths that will lead to economic revitalization for the region (Cabinet Office, 2015).

In Comprehensive Strategy from 2014 Cabinet Secretariat noted that creation of jobs should be connected to the economic power and consumption power of the region. They aim to

create stable employment for 300,000 young people in rural areas over the next five years until 2020. In order to support a virtuous cycle of work and people, it is necessary to revitalize towns by bringing about innovation in urban development while utilizing ICT so that each region can make use of its individuality and become independent. Comprehensive Strategy from 2014 states that creating highly productive and dynamic industries that attract human resources and funds to the local economy, and create attractive workplaces for young people, women and generations in their prime is of utmost importance in revitalizing the rural economies. Another goal for the next five years until 2020 is for companies to reinforce rural bases by relocating part or their head office functions and increase the number of employees at rural bases by 40,000 people (Cabinet Office, 2014a).

From 2016 onwards, Cabinet Secretariat will contribute to the achievement of performance targets by 2020 in the service industry, agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries and tourism industry (Cabinet Office, 2015). In addition, they aim to establish a system for monitoring major measures at the Headquarters for Vitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs. The promotion of Local Abenomics is mentioned frequently in the Comprehensive Documents from 2014 to 2020.

Since Japan's rural areas are overflowing with attractions such as rich nature, unique history, culture and traditions, and unique agricultural, forestry and fishery products, Cabinet Secretariat aims to rediscover, analyse, and disseminate this information, and nurture the concept of pride and affection for the hometown (Cabinet Office, 2016). The Comprehensive Strategy document from 2016 states that all (Japanese) people have pride and attachment to their hometown where they were born and raised. That is why local cultures should be promoted and marketed to potential migrants.

In order to expand the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Volunteers, Cabinet Secretariat will carry out publicity through magazine advertisements, web content, enhance training for volunteers, enhance support for members' entrepreneurship and commercialization, establish a Regional Revitalization Volunteers Support Desk, and cooperate in regional revitalization (Cabinet Office, 2019a).

4.2.3 Solutions to Revitalize Regional Economies

Comprehensive start-ups create new businesses, new industries and employment. That is why development of industries that can attract demand and investment from outside the region by

providing support, promoting regional innovation and supporting core companies is vital (Cabinet Office, 2014a).

In order to develop an environment where people can work while living in rural areas without living in urban areas, Comprehensive Strategy from 2014 states that Cabinet Secretariat will promote the development of ICT infrastructure, cooperate with related ministries and agencies and identify good practices for right execution through *model demonstrations*. With the utilization of ICT, it will be possible to revitalize local industries, maintain and improve local services and create a flexible working environment without the constraints of distance and time. Furthermore, in order to create a new flow of people to rural areas, there will be promotion of hometown telework while taking into account the actual situation in local areas and the needs of companies. It is stated in Comprehensive Strategy document from 2014 that through these efforts, by 2020, 10 percent or more of all workers will be teleworkers who work from home at least one day a week (4.5 percent in 2013).

According to Comprehensive Strategy from 2017 to revitalize local industries and improve the quality of life, the “Regional Revitalization IT Utilization Promotion Plan” that promotes the introduction of IT will be steadily implemented. In particular, Cabinet Secretariat has established a portal site that supports the horizontal development of best practices using ICT in various fields, such as wild life damage countermeasures in ICT urban development projects (Cabinet Office, 2017). To accelerate the efficiency of administration and the creation of new services through the use of IT and data, Cabinet Secretariat will promote the use of information-based credit banks (information banks).

Support measures such as taxes and subsidies will be taken for businesses that relocate or newly expand headquarters functions such as training facilities (Cabinet Office, 2014a). There will be promotion for community businesses, building up of small but independent businesses that suit the region and promote smooth circulation of the regional economy. Specifically, the production of agricultural, forestry and fishery products that make use of the characteristics of the region, the creation of high added value through the development of 6th industry, the promotion of exchange industries with cities with tourism resources and roadside stations, and the introduction of renewable energy will be promoted (Cabinet Office, 2015). There will be cooperation with various organizations inside and outside the region such as agricultural cooperatives and chambers of commerce.

Examples of fields that can be supported include the internationalization of regional skills (local innovation), branding of regional attractions, sophistication of regional jobs (improvement of productivity of local services, etc.), fostering and securing human resources to promote regional revitalization, promoting immigration and lifelong activity, community-wide work style reform and making cities compact and forming public transportation networks (Cabinet Office, 2017). A series of efforts will be made to discover people eligible for support (finding the people who have willingness to work), support for improving the working environment of small and medium-sized enterprises with the goal of making it easier for women and the elderly to work and support for prefectural projects (new employment support projects for women and the elderly) (Cabinet Office, 2018).

To attract human resources and funds to the local economies, and create attractive workplaces for young people, women and elderly, it is necessary to improve the average income in rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2016). This can be realized by bringing the companies functions from metropolitan areas to rural areas. According to Comprehensive Strategy from 2016, to further expand the virtuous cycle of the regional economy, Cabinet Secretariat will promote *hometown work* to create a flow of people and information to the regions. Specifically, there are hometown working holidays in which young people from urban areas stay in rural areas for a certain period of time and learn about life in the countryside while working (Cabinet Office, 2016). Trial satellite offices will be promoted to establish companies in the region.

In order to create and secure attractive and high-quality employment opportunities in rural areas, Cabinet Secretariat will promote entrepreneurship in local areas, revitalize local business activities by supporting businesses that drive local economies and develop businesses with potential growth (Cabinet Office, 2017). In addition, Cabinet Secretariat will increase the presence of women involved in the fishery industry, promote workplace reforms that make it easier for women to work, and promote fishery industry as a target for women to choose jobs from. In order to boost the attractiveness of the fishery industry, Cabinet Secretariat promotes a plan called “Treasure of the Sea!” (海の宝!) (Cabinet Office, 2019a).

Comprehensive Strategy document from 2018 states that with the cooperation of economic organizations, Cabinet Secretariat will collaborate with large urban companies and create opportunities for professional human resources from large urban companies to return to rural areas through various work styles such as secondment (job rotation) and training. There will be support related to the recruitment of specialized human resources (Cabinet Office, 2018).

Furthermore, local governments and local communities should further encourage the participation of local residents in the planning, implementation and verification of strategies for regional revitalization (Cabinet Office, 2020). The national government will prepare a mechanism for matching support for these human resources that are necessary for the region, build a nationwide network, disseminate information related to the measures and promote horizontal development. It was emphasized in Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2020 that Cabinet Secretariat will strive to build a community where *everyone can play an active role*, engage in multi-generational interaction regardless of age or disability and work for the benefit of the community by making use of their abilities. Reviewing and updating work styles is a way of achieving this.

Regarding the use of vacant houses for migration to rural areas, the utilization of the “Act on Special Measures Concerning Promotion of Measures against Vacant Houses” will be promoted, including the formulation of plans for measures against vacant houses by municipalities (Cabinet Office, 2017; 2018). To help the circulation of existing houses, including vacant houses, the government will promote the use of the "National Bank of Vacant Houses and Vacant Lots," which aggregates information on vacant houses from local governments and enables one-stop searches for property information nationwide. According to Comprehensive Strategy from 2017 Japanese government promotes "living in two areas" as well as complete relocation to rural areas with the incentives that migrants will receive support for the renovation of housing and reduction of housing loan interest rates by the Japan Housing Finance Agency.

In Comprehensive Strategy document from 2020 it is stated that the national government has implemented a growth strategy for the Japanese economy, including the regional economies, as well as efforts to promote dynamic engagement of all citizens, work style reforms, and an era of 100-year lifespans. The focus is in the promotion of local industries such as agriculture, manufacturing and tourism, encouragement in entrepreneurship and the creation of innovation and human resource development through collaboration between universities and companies. Due to these efforts, the younger generation is living in rural areas and starting businesses and there is a rise in movement to explore new possibilities in life (Cabinet Office, 2020).

4.3 Work Style Reform

The third major theme represented in the Abe Administration “Vitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” documents is the work style reform. This theme includes factors such as long working

hours and *karoshi*, telework, hometown telework, annual paid leave, IT and support for rural companies.

4.3.1 Status Quo and problems

According to Comprehensive Strategy from 2014 the government is aware of the long working hours that pose problems such as health problems for workers, they affect the work-life balance such as childcare and nursing care, and are in part responsible for the decline in labour productivity. In 2014, the Act on Promotion of Measures to Prevent *Karoshi*, was enacted, and in July 2015 the Cabinet decided on the outline of measures to prevent *karoshi* (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016). Strengthening measures to reduce long working hours has become an urgent issue in Japan.

The number of young people is decreasing due to the declining birth rate and diverse workers such as women and the elderly cannot play an active role in a variety of work styles because the current working culture does not support them (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). Furthermore, they often have restrictions on how they work, which is a fact that has been overlooked until now. While there is a serious shortage of workers in local communities, there are many people who have specialized knowledge and experience and are willing to work but cannot work as they wish due to various lifestyle restrictions (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018).

According to Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2017, looking at the current state of work style in Japan, many men in the child-rearing generation work long hours and the acquisition rate of childcare leave and annual paid leave is low. The amount of time men of child-rearing generation spend on housework and child-rearing is at the lowest level internationally (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017). It is reported in the Comprehensive Strategy document from 2016 that long working hours, work styles such as job transfer, a low rate of taking childcare leave and the existence of fixed awareness of gender role division lead to various unfavourable treatment due to pregnancy, childbirth and taking childcare leave. The problem of harassment against unmarried women and the burden of childcare on women are increasing (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017). As a result, women are still forced to choose between work and child-rearing, whether in big cities or rural areas. Comprehensive Strategy document from 2018 points out that it is necessary for women of child-rearing generation to be able to foresee their future career paths so that they can work on pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing with a piece of mind. As the population

ages, balancing work and nursing care will become an issue for both men and women. Long working hours not only make it difficult for workers to maintain their health but also make it difficult to balance work and family life.

Comprehensive Strategy document from 2020 explains how the COVID-19 pandemic had sudden changes in individual awareness and behaviour regarding old work styles. Japan declared work style emergency which meant that people were asked to refrain from going out. Due to this, the number of companies implementing telework increased rapidly (Cabinet Office, 2020). In addition, non-face-to-face web conferencing is becoming popular for exchanges such as business negotiations outside the organizations. Such changes in work styles are also captured in the Cabinet Office's "Survey of changes in lifestyle attitudes and behaviour under the influence of the new coronavirus infection." According to the survey, 34.6 percent of people nationwide have experienced telework (Cabinet Office, 2020). The percentage is 48.9 percent in the Tokyo metropolitan area and 55.5 percent in the 23 wards of Tokyo.

With regard to telework, the number of companies implementing telework is increasing rapidly due to concerns about the spread of infectious diseases (Cabinet Office, 2020). There are more cases of communication inside and outside the organization using web conferences instead of face-to-face meetings. Cabinet Secretariat states in Comprehensive Strategy from 2020 that telework is widely recognized as a method in Japan and it is spreading. The spread of telework regardless of place of work can be said to be an epoch-making behavioural change that has the potential to alleviate population concentration in the Tokyo area and expand migration and employment to rural areas.

The documents discuss how in Europe and the United States employment with restrictions on work locations and duties is widespread and employees cannot be transferred from one work location to another against their will. This is not the case in Japan, where employees can be transferred without asking them first (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018).

4.3.2 Goals to Reform the Japanese Work Style

Cabinet Secretariat will strive to achieve a work-life balance, correct the gender gap in all aspects of recruitment, placement and training and realize a work style that allows a work-life balance and improves the environment for child-rearing and nursing care (Cabinet Office, 2014a).

In Comprehensive Strategy document from 2015 the government aims to formulate “employment management points related to relocation” that will contribute to the balance between work and family life of workers, while taking into consideration the management decisions of companies. This is expected to be done by the end of March 2017. In addition, Cabinet Secretariat will work to popularize and promote work styles that are not bound by time or place, such as flextime system, telework and promoting the use of satellite offices (Cabinet Office, 2015).

The government is aiming to achieve work-life balance, including reviewing diverse work styles and relocations, and correct gender disparities of recruitment, placement and training. Measures such as work style reforms that are in line with the actual situation in the regions will be implemented (Cabinet Office, 2015).

In order for young people to work with a sense of purpose, it is important to develop a workplace environment that is rewarding for them (Cabinet Office, 2017). According to Comprehensive Strategy from 2017, Cabinet Secretariat will aim to provide support for companies to promote work-life balance, review long working hours and promote efforts such as directly visiting companies to provide consultation support.

Aiming for full use of annual paid leave, intensive publicity will be carried out in October 2018, called “period for promoting the use of annual paid leave” (Cabinet Office, 2017). There will be promotion for using the annual paid leave in cooperation with local events and festivals.

According to Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2016, the key performance indicators that the government should achieve by 2020 are as follows: 1. Raise the rate of continued employment of women before and after giving birth to their first child to 55% (38% in 2010), 2. Raise childcare leave acquisition rate for men to 13% (2.03% in 2013), 3. Reduce the percentage of employees working 60 hours or more per week to 5% (8.8% in 2013), and 4. Raise annual paid leave acquisition rate to 70% (48.8% in 2013).

4.3.3 Solutions to Implement Work Style Reform

Comprehensive Strategy from 2016 discusses that the biggest key to realizing society in which all 100 million people are dynamically engaged is work style reform. The reality of work styles differs from region to region, and in order to promote work style reforms more effectively it is important to implement initiatives in local areas where they are put to practice.

Based on this idea, while utilizing the Regional Work Style Conference, the Regional Work Style Reform Comprehensive Support Centre will be established (Cabinet Office, 2016). This support centre will offer one-stop support for companies and employees by work style reform advisors and proactively provide consultation support by visiting companies directly.

As it was mentioned in Status quo and problems, the documents discuss how in Europe and the United States employment with restrictions on work locations and duties is widespread and employees cannot be transferred from one work location to another against their will (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). In Comprehensive Strategy document from 2017, Cabinet Secretariat introduces and popularizes the full-time employment system and disseminates the “Hints and methods for employment management related to relocation” that was formulated in March 2017. In addition, popularization of work styles that are not bound by time or place, flextime system, telework such as telecommuting and satellite work will be further promoted.

While the number of young people is decreasing due to the declining birth rate, work style initiative will enable diverse workers such as women and the elderly, who often have restrictions on how they work, to play an active role in a variety of work styles. It is necessary to work on the realization of flexible work styles according to the diverse lifestyles and restrictions of all people, including the elderly and unemployed (Cabinet Office, 2015). The Regional Work Style Reform Support Team consisting of relevant ministries and agencies and experts will be launched to provide information and other support to each region (Cabinet Office, 2015). As a result, under the leadership of local governments, the entire region will identify regional issues through analysis of various indicators, set goals, improve the treatment of young people, and consider work style reforms, including the creation of attractive workplaces.

The government will initiate campaigns to encourage employees to take vacations in rural areas and do remote work in satellite offices and hometown telework. These will create a flow of new people to the rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2016).

In addition to promoting efforts to reduce long working hours by the Headquarters for the Reduction of Long Working Hours (headed by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare), Cabinet Secretariat will establish a new Work Style Reform Promotion Headquarters in each prefectural labour bureau (Cabinet Office, 2016). They will promote efforts to curb long working hours and encourage the use of annual paid leave in accordance with the actual

conditions of each prefecture. Specifically, to reduce the non-scheduled working hours and encourage taking annual paid leave, Cabinet Secretariat will work with the top management of leading companies in various parts of Japan (Cabinet Office, 2016; 2017). They will launch a portal site that disseminates information, and develop support for each company by work style and rest style consultants.

Since strengthening measures to reduce long working hours has become an urgent issue in Japan, the Work Style Reform Action Plan was approved to address this issue in March 2017, which introduced the cap on overtime work with penalties, and in July 2018 the Law Concerning the Development of Related Laws for Promoting Work Style Reform, which incorporates upper limits on overtime work and encourages employees to take annual paid leave, was promulgated (Cabinet Office, 2018).

Cabinet Secretariat will optimize and consolidate the management of public facilities and promote work style reforms aimed at overcoming the declining birth rate at local companies. The reforms include dispatching personnel and support for companies related to the introduction of IT by local governments, promotion of work style reforms such as hometown telework that encourages the flow of companies and employment to rural areas and improvement of administrative efficiency and new services through the use of IT (Cabinet Office, 2015).

To further disseminate information about the imminent importance of work style reforms, Cabinet Secretariat introduces meetings and conferences to be held in 2016 (Cabinet Office, 2015). They will set up meetings in each region with local stakeholders such as local governments and labour-management organizations, and promote work style reform in line with the actual situation of each region. Also, the Regional Work Style Reform Conference will be held to address the issues of work-life balance, long working hours, diverse work styles, women's active participation in the community and youth and non-regular employment measures (Cabinet Office, 2015). The "Regional Work Style Reform Support Team" will support these efforts of reforms throughout regions.

From the perspective of increasing the degree of freedom in the work location of national civil servants engaged in the work of the ministry and not being limited to Tokyo, telework and remote work will be promoted for national civil servants (Cabinet Office, 2019). Cabinet Secretariat will demonstrate the possibility of establishing satellite offices of central ministries and agencies in local areas to execute part of the ministry's work outside of Tokyo.

As it was mentioned in chapter 4.2 there are hometown working holidays in which young people from urban areas stay in rural areas for a certain period of time and learn about life in the countryside while working (Cabinet Office, 2016). This kind of movement not only allows workers to enjoy the rich natural and living environment of the region while doing rewarding and attractive work, but also for companies from the perspective of BCP (Business Continuity Plan) (Cabinet Office, 2019a). It means that the development of bases in the region and securing diverse human resources will be economically rational in the long term. Trial satellite offices are promoted to establish companies in the region with the help of Regional Human Resources Department and Next Generation Collaborative Start-up Support Project, which will connect the ideas of young people who will be responsible for the future of the region to founding businesses and encourage the launch of community-based companies using local resources and funds (Cabinet Office, 2019a). There will also be a local life support project that protects the lives of residents in the future by establishing businesses that support living such as shopping support.

Based on the Priority Policy for Accelerating the Active Participation of Women, workplaces for women will be secured in local communities, women's entrepreneurship will be supported and encourage active participation of women in fields where there has been only a little active participation by women (Cabinet Office, 2018). To steadily expand the active participation of women in companies and in society as whole, especially in areas where the excess outflow of young women is regarded as a major issue, Cabinet Secretariat will work to understand the wishes of young women regarding work and family to ensure that the hopes of young people are reflected in the community development. Local governments will support flexible work styles that correspond to the new daily life of women and support re-learning and career development for women (Cabinet Office, 2018).

Comprehensive Strategy from 2018 discusses that the promotion of data-utilization smart cities that efficiently solve complex urban issues and provide new and beneficial services to residents, enhancement of information dissemination from local communities and flexibility that enables effective use of time and place, are ways of making work style reform reality in the future. To make telework convenient the government will promote the development of regional communications and broadcasting environments, such as high-speed mobile including public wireless LAN and 5th generation mobile communication systems as well as high-speed broadband infrastructure such as optical fiber (Cabinet Office, 2018).

In Comprehensive Strategy from 2020 it is discussed that above mentioned measures have brought about changes in the public awareness and currently it is thought that even people living in the rural areas can do the same work as in the city through telework, which is leading to the expansion of urban companies to rural areas and the migration of their employees and their families to rural areas. Telework not only makes it possible to carry out urban work in rural areas, but also makes it possible for working people to live a fulfilling life connected to a community (Cabinet Office, 2020).

4.4 Work-Life Balance

The fourth major theme represented in the Abe Administration “Vitalizing Towns, People, and Jobs” documents is the work-life balance. This theme includes factors such as women and men’s roles in the society, childcare, after school children’s clubs, pregnancy, child-rearing and marriage.

4.4.1 Status quo and problems

According to a survey conducted by Cabinet Secretariat in 2014, about 40 percent of urban residents want to move to rural areas if conditions such as work are met (Cabinet Office, 2014b). In order to break the vicious cycle of people moving to cities from rural areas and rural areas emptying because of this, it is necessary to create a new flow of people to rural areas by establishing a virtuous cycle in which jobs attract people and people attract jobs (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017).

Comprehensive Strategy from 2015 states that the work-life balance is negatively affected by the fixed awareness of the division of roles between men and women in housework and childcare. While many men of the child-rearing generation work long hours, women are expected to stay at home and take care of the children. Women are still forced to choose between work and child-rearing both in big cities and rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015). The level of the employment rate of women raising children has correlation with long working hours, commuting hours and the availability of nursery schools (Cabinet Office, 2020).

At the same time there has been a gradual improvement in the bottom of the so-called “M-shaped curve” in which labour force participation rate of women by age group declines during the child-rearing period (Cabinet Office, 2017; 2018; 2020). Government has been working to

create an environment where women of child-rearing age can become pregnant and give birth without worry while working and can balance work and childcare (Cabinet Office, 2017; 2018). However, the situation is nowhere near as good as it should be.

According to the Comprehensive Strategy documents from 2014 to 2020 - as it was mentioned in chapter 4.1.1 - the number of women migrating to the Tokyo metropolitan area in excess of that of men has been trending in the recent years. This is why the government needs to create jobs that are rewarding for women in the rural regions and balance work and family according to their wishes. Women are often burdened with housework, childcare, nursing care, etc., and even if they have a desire and ability to work, it may be difficult for them to participate in full-time work (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019a; 2020). One possible reason why young women are moving to Tokyo is because the rural environment is difficult to work in. In some regions, there is still a strong sense of gender roles, such as the husband should work outside the home and the wife should take care of the home (Cabinet Office, 2015).

4.4.2 Goals to Achieve Balance Between Work and Life

In order to raise the rate of realization of marriage wishes to 80 percent and raise the percentage of couples who desire to have children to 95 percent Cabinet aims to provide seamless support for marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing (Cabinet Office, 2014a). Also, when jobs are born in rural areas and new people flow to rural areas, those people create new jobs, achieving a virtuous cycle (Cabinet Office, 2014a). The virtuous cycle can be sustained by creating an environment in which the younger generation's wishes regarding marriage, childbirth and child-rearing can be fulfilled. It is only when these efforts to create a virtuous cycle of work and people are passed on to the next generation that a truly sustainable virtuous cycle is established in the region. In Comprehensive Strategy 2014 Cabinet Secretariat promises to secure sound economic foundation, promote the realization of work style that allows both men and women to balance childcare and work and create an environment that allows the younger generation to get married, become pregnant and raise a child.

Cabinet Secretariat set goals for the systematic development of after-school children's classrooms in Comprehensive Strategy from 2015, and they are as follows: 1. Percentage of support for expectant and nursing mothers with high support needs: 100 percent, 2. Aim to eliminate childcare waiting lists by the end of fiscal 2017 (number of children on waiting

lists: 23,167 in April 2015), 3. After-school children's clubs and after-school children's classrooms will be implemented in all elementary school districts (approximately 20,000 locations) in a coordinated manner, 4. Improve the realization ratio of three-generation cohabitation/living close to each other, and 5. Reduce the percentage of people who cite "childcare and education costs too much money" as the reason why they cannot have the ideal number of children (60.4 percent in 2010).

Cabinet Secretariat aims to realize a work-life balance by correcting gender disparities in all aspects of recruitment, placement and training, realizing working styles that allow work and family to be compatible and improving the environment related to childcare and nursing care (Cabinet Office, 2020). Regarding this situation Cabinet Secretariat set the following goals in Comprehensive Strategy from 2017: 1. Improve the continuous employment rate of women before and after giving birth to their first child to 55 percent (53.1 percent in 2015), 2. Raise childcare leave acquisition rate for men to 13 percent (3.16 percent in 2016), 3. Reduce the percentage of employees working 60 hours or more per week to 5 percent (7.7 percent in 2016) and 4. Raise annual paid leave acquisition rate to 70 percent (48.7 percent in 2015).

4.4.3 Solutions to Live and Work with a Piece of Mind

In order to enable workers to balance work with child-rearing and nursing care, and non-regular employees to take childcare leave, the "Act on Welfare of Workers who Take Care of Children or Family Members" was revised in March 2015, 2016 and 2017, and enacted in 2018 (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018). Cabinet Secretariat will extend the period of childcare leave up to a maximum of two years old, inform individual employees of the childcare leave system, and steadily enforce the obligation to make efforts to create leave for childcare purposes (Cabinet Office, 2017). In addition, to promote the taking of childcare leave, Cabinet Secretariat will expand support for small and medium-sized business owners and encourage men to take childcare leave (Cabinet Office, 2016).

To reduce the burden of child-rearing and education costs, early childhood education and childcare will be made free of charge and higher education for low-income households will be completely free (Cabinet Office, 2019a). At the same time, based on the "Child-raising Peace of Mind Plan," Cabinet Secretariat will promote the development of nursery schools and other childcare facilities in order to eliminate waiting lists for children by the end of fiscal 2020 at the latest (Cabinet Office, 2019a). The working conditions of nursery teachers will be steadily improved, based on the "Plan for the Active Participation of All People". In the future,

Cabinet Secretariat will continue to work on quantitative expansion and improvement of quality in early childhood education, childcare, and child-rearing support (Cabinet Office, 2019a).

According to Comprehensive Strategy from 2016, to break down the barrier of quitting work after a child enter elementary school, Cabinet Secretariat has steadily implemented the Comprehensive After-School Children's Plan, and established an after-school children's club centred on an integrated program. In addition, based on the "Priority Policy for Accelerating the Active Participation of Women", Cabinet Secretariat will secure workplaces for women in local communities, support women's entrepreneurship, promote active participation of women in fields where there has been little active participation by women, and promote work-life balance (Cabinet Office, 2016). These measures will be done according to the "Basic Plan for Gender Equality".

Furthermore, Comprehensive Strategy from 2019 states that each local public entity will establish a system for cross-sectional consideration of specific initiatives through the visualization of regional characteristics based on factors such as child-rearing support systems, work styles of men and women, and the liveliness of the town. Cabinet Secretariat will develop a regional evaluation tool for countermeasures against the declining birth rate and promote its use (Cabinet Office, 2019a).

5 Discussion

The findings of the analysis of Abe Administration's policy documents concerning regional revitalization and work were introduced in the previous chapter. In this chapter I will connect the findings to my theoretical framework and to larger context.

My first research question asked what the main themes are in Abe Administration's Regional Revitalization documents. The main themes that emerged from the analysis chapter were women and work, gender roles in work and family life, realizing new lifestyles for young people, death from overwork and *furusato* nostalgia. These themes will be discussed one by one in this chapter. Also, the second research question and its sub-questions, how work related challenges are identified in the policy documents, what topics are prioritised and what kind of solutions are provided, will be answered in detail below each theme. I will make a summary in the following chapter 6 Conclusions.

5.1 Women's Opportunities to Work and Live in Big Cities

In chapter 4.1 about population crisis, the primary material stated that there are fewer employment opportunities in rural areas and the environment is not offering a good balance between work and home life. Also, women's participation is not seen as a valuable asset in rural areas. Because of the lack of opportunities to lead a satisfying life people migrate from rural towns to metropolitan areas, especially women.

Although women find more satisfying work opportunities and lifestyles in metropolitan areas, they have difficulty to balance work and family life. This is because the lack of childcare options forces women to quit their jobs. The theoretical background supports this view. As mentioned in 3.3.1 about women in Japanese work life, Coulmas (2007) wrote that although women's participation is encouraged by the government, the attitudes and social reality are harsh: women are continuously discriminated if they are expected to have children sometime in the near future or they are hired only for irregular work. According to Rich (2019) women automatically have fewer chances in career if they wish to have children.

The primary material points out that childcare and education costs are one of the reasons for young people's reluctance to have children. People in their 20s and 30s have shifted into low-income group over the past 20 years. Literature suggested that 14 years of education costs average 5 million to 10 million yen per child (Coulmas, 2007). Also the competition for good

colleges and universities is fierce and private tutoring is expensive but necessary. On top of this, families need to pay all the expenses outside school life. Both primary and secondary material agree that starting a family is seen as too big of an economic burden.

Women's empowerment was a reoccurring theme in the documents. Women were described as part of the future of Japanese society, influencers, entrepreneurs and active participants in work, also in management positions. Making women equally important part of work life is essential in supporting Japanese society. The chapter 4.2 about struggling regional economies showed that unemployment has improved in all prefectures. Although the working-age population continues to decline, the number of workers is on the rise. Cabinet Secretariat reported an increase of 2.63 million from 2015 to 2018 and it is thought that the social advancement of women and elderly is the reason for this (Cabinet Office, 2019a). Theoretical background speculated that the Japanese population will drop to 85 million by 2050 (Matsutani, 2006). Including women in every field of society is indeed vital since smaller population is expected to support the vast elderly population in the future.

The focus of work style reform was quite strongly on women and elderly in the primary sources. It is understandable since traditionally men have been the ones going to work while women and elderly stayed at home. Of course, many women work alongside men nowadays, but the fact is that women face difficulties at work that men don't. Cabinet Secretariat wrote in the documents that women and elderly are a workforce that need to be utilized. The language used when talking about women in the documents truly gave the feeling of empowerment. In Comprehensive Strategy from 2016 Cabinet Secretariat wrote that "We will promote women's active participation in the community because creating a place where women can play an active role will lead them to feel the charm of the community, find a place to belong, and continue to live there" (p. 4). Rural locations do not offer much employment opportunities presently and women's active participation is not in place. As mentioned above, work opportunities are better in big cities although women suffer from harassment due to pregnancy. Despite this, women tend to stay in metropolitan areas because they have an opportunity to live more freely the lives they desire with diverse recreational options.

As I expected, the primary material presented women's situation in work life in the same way it is discussed in the secondary material. The primary material talks truthfully about the problems women face. Women have more options for work in metropolitan areas but, on the other hand, they are often discriminated and forced to settle for irregular work. Government

wishes to empower women but the negative attitudes towards hiring young women who might decide to start a family at some point are deeply rooted in the Japanese society.

5.2 Rural Areas Have Strong Gender Roles in Work and Family Life

According to secondary data, men and women's roles are still quite conventional in rural areas: men are expected to be the main breadwinners of the household and women should take care of the home and children (Coulmas, 2007). Also, Yamamoto (2014) pointed out that various fields of work lack in representation of women, both in rural and urban areas, childcare support systems are insufficient and rural areas are lagging behind in promoting gender equality. The primary material delivered the same message: all Comprehensive Strategies from 2014 to 2020 stated that women's abilities are not fully supported or utilized in rural areas. Since the rural areas are emptying of women in particular, primary and secondary data both suggested that the attitudes in rural areas should be changed so that women can find alternative lifestyles and reach their full potential also outside of metropolitan areas.

As mentioned in 3.3.2 about gender roles and work, Traphagan (2017) presented that women's empowerment has taken place in some individual parts of rural Japan and women have been encouraged to start their own businesses as well as take part in farming and fishery industry. Primary data also pointed out that Cabinet Secretariat will promote women's participation in agriculture and fisheries, which are male dominated industries.

While reading the primary data I got the impression that the Japanese government has a strong will to make a change in the society, in attitudes and in women and men's roles, and to make it possible for young people to lead new kinds of lives, but concrete actions are scarce compared to the reassurances. For example, despite their name the Action Plan documents - that were left out from the analysis- did not offer concrete plans for the future and mainly repeated was already said in the Comprehensive Strategy documents. Furthermore, it wasn't always indicated which government department would be responsible for which reform.

5.3 Offering Diverse Lifestyles for Young People

Theoretical background stated that individual values that differ from the traditional collective values are currently produced in metropolitan areas and they will spread throughout the nation and Japan will face the rise of new values and lifestyles (Matsutani, 2006). The younger

generations are interested in finding lifestyles that give them more freedom over their work and free time. As mentioned in 3.1 about regional revitalization, young and educated people are migrating to rural areas in search of a different lifestyle. The trend is thought to reflect the collapse of lifetime employment system in Japan. People in their 20s, 30s and 40s find themselves in search of satisfaction from work and lifestyles other than traditional career in big corporations (Reiher, 2020).

In primary data, young people are often mentioned together with new work styles that would attract young workers to rural areas. However, I expected there to be more detailed information on young people's situation in the work life but this was missing from the documents. Theoretical background tells us that in case young people do not receive employment straight after their graduation they will end up in a limbo of part time jobs (Coulmas, 2007). Since women's situation had relatively lengthy introduction I expected there to be mentions about the uncertain situation of young people as well in the primary data.

Comprehensive Strategy from 2020 stated that the number of companies implementing telework is increasing rapidly because of COVID-19. As it was mentioned in 3.4, there was a remarkable surge in telework from 2016 to 2021 when the overall rate of telework increased from 13.3 per cent of employees in to 27.3 per cent (Osawa & Kingston, 2022). Large corporations allured new employees with new work-life balance that allowed them to get up to 3 hours per day free time that otherwise would be spent commuting. The reality however, is that many Japanese households lack high speed internet connection and smaller firms do not have the necessary resources to enable telework (Osawa & Kingston, 2022). It is evident from the primary data that Japan struggles with high-speed mobile including public wireless LAN and high-speed broadband infrastructure such as optical fiber and that these need to be developed in order to make telework effortless (Cabinet Office, 2018). Primary data stated that government wishes to promote the implementation of high speed internet across the nation. Although telework is discussed frequently in the primary sources and Japanese government has a positive view about the emergence of telework, the struggles that Japan has in implementing telework was largely missing from the policy papers.

According to the primary material, in the past, there was a certain degree of tendency for students to return to their hometowns to find employment even after enrolling at universities in the Tokyo area (Cabinet Office, 2014b). This trend is particularly noticeable among young women, suggesting the importance of securing attractive workplaces for young women in

rural areas (Cabinet Office, 2014b). But this statement is in contradiction with what is said in Comprehensive Strategy from 2015: according to the document many women stay in metropolitan areas after their studies because they have an opportunity to live more freely there without pressure of getting married and starting a family. There is a clear trend of women moving to big cities more than men (e-Stat, 2022). Although the primary material gives mixed statements, secondary material seems to be more accurate and coherent: women continue to be attracted to big cities to escape the rural areas' conservative attitudes about gender roles. Meanwhile, men find teleworking as an opportunity to migrate to rural areas more than women do (e-Stat, 2022).

5.4 Death from Overwork and Work Style Reform

According to the primary sources Japanese government is worried about the excessive working hours and acknowledges *karoshi* (death from overwork) as a real problem in Japanese society (Cabinet Office, 2014a; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019a; 2020). Secondary material points out that since the change in working hours legislation the matter has received vast attention in Japan (Takami, 2019; Sugimoto, 2021). Now there are definite upper limits on overtime work and unlike before, now employers will suffer punishment if they violate these limits (Sugimoto, 2021).

The primary data also states that due to excessive working hours employees' productivity actually decreases and is not beneficial for the company (Cabinet Office, 2014a). Secondary data is in line with this statement. As it was explained in chapter 3.3 about Japanese work culture, it has been a norm at Japanese corporations to devote one's life to the service of the company and show loyalty by spending long hours at the office (Sugimoto, 2021). This was something that both employers and employees found important in order to make the company perform at its best. The practice was not questioned for a long time since it was one of the features of the economic miracle from 1950s to early 1990s (Sugimoto, 2021). Although the government understands that excessive working hours are not beneficial it is difficult to change this part of the Japanese work culture.

However, as Sugimoto (2021) pointed out in 3.3, the 'Japanese-style' management model is not as popular anymore and workers want more individually tailored, casual work styles. Still, according to primary data it seems that companies, especially smaller ones, are reluctant to change the traditional way of working. It becomes evident while reading the policy documents that the Japanese government realises that the employers' attitudes are in the way

of realising new work styles. As primary data pointed out, Cabinet Secretariat plans to dispatch personnel to companies and help them to adopt teleworking tools and educate them how to take women, young people and elderly in consideration and become appealing work places for them as well (Cabinet Office, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018).

5.5 Building the Furusato Nostalgia

A major problem for regional economies which was discussed both in the theoretical background and in the primary material were the abandoned buildings. As mentioned in theoretical background, there are successful cases of companies who built satellite offices in abandoned houses in rural areas (Yoshimoto, 2019). I expected the Comprehensive Strategy documents to give more specific guidelines on how to make the companies move their offices to rural areas but there were no suggestions or a plan for this.

As expected, it is possible to notice nostalgia from the way the primary documents talk about rural areas. They are seen as the original home of people and Japanese often feel pride and affection towards their hometown, *furusato*. It was said in the Comprehensive Strategy document from 2015 that: “As the population declines and becomes super-aging, many ‘hometowns’ across the country are facing a crisis of their very existence. Therefore, we will reaffirm the value of ‘hometown’ and convey the importance of loving ‘hometown’. In addition, for those born in the city, efforts will be made to create a new ‘hometown for them by raising their attachment to and sense of belonging to that place’.” (Cabinet Office, 2015, p. 72) Romanticizing the countryside is typical for Japanese and largely researched in Japan. As we can see here, it is a strategy also largely used by the government. The image of ‘slow life’ attracts Japanese people who wish to leave the fast paced city life (Klien, 2015). Although the idea about rural areas feels inviting and nostalgic to many, it became evident from the policy documents that people also see rural areas as conservative and narrow minded places. Big cities attract people, especially women, who don’t want to live the typical family life. The primary material states that people in rural areas still harbour old attitudes towards couples: men are the main breadwinners of the household and women raise children and take care of the home. Secondary material supports this statement.

One way of supporting the rural areas is for local governments, financial institutions and support groups to make small investments and donations (hometown investment) using methods such as crowdfunding for regional revitalization projects (Cabinet Office, 2015). As explained both in primary and secondary data, another way for individual civilians to support

the location of their choosing is through local revitalization support tax system, *furusato nozei* (ふるさと納税) (Cabinet Office, 2015; Nagata, 2022).

The *furusato* nostalgia is evident later in the documents as well. In Comprehensive Strategy from 2019 it is stated that the hometown tax donation system is a way of conveying gratitude and support to the hometown and local governments. This is how strengthening cooperation between individuals and the community, and building connections becomes possible. It is mentioned in the same document that elementary, junior high and high schools will offer courses on “hometown development” to deepen the young people’s understanding of local history, industries and cultures. The core of hometown development are the activities in the region through which people can systematically delve into and rediscover the unique nature, history and culture of Japanese *furusato*, the source of pride in each hometown.

6 Conclusion

Urbanization has resulted many countries' rural areas emptying of residents, services, and opportunities to work and study as more and more people have moved to urban areas. Most of the investment and resources go to urban areas and therefore rural towns and villages are left behind in development. Japan is struggling to revitalize its rural areas and attract residents to live in the empty houses that the rural towns and villages are full of. I chose to study this situation of countryside hollowing out and Japanese government's efforts of regional revitalization from the work point-of-view. Since Abe's regional revitalization policies were an important part of Japanese politics for most of 2010s, I wanted to contribute to the English research that so far has been scarce.

In this thesis I have studied Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's administration's policy papers about regional revitalization in Japan between 2014 and 2020. I made a qualitative content analysis of sections that focused on 'work' in the 9 policy documents. The research questions that I aimed to answer were:

1. What are the main themes in Abe Administration's Regional Revitalization documents?
2. How work related challenges are identified in the policy documents?
 - a. What topics are prioritised?
 - b. What kind of solutions are provided?

The main themes listed in the documents were population crisis, struggling regional economies, work style reform, and work-life balance. However, the analysis showed that there were other underlying themes that also received much attention: the themes that emerged from the analysis chapter were women and work, gender roles in work and family life, realizing new lifestyles for young people, death from overwork and *furusato* nostalgia. I found out that the attitudes and views about rural areas are mixed: people see them as nostalgic places and slow life is possible in idyllic rural setting, but rural areas are also conservative and attitudes in rural areas are often narrow minded. While rural areas are seen in positive light as the "original home of Japanese people", people living there also have strong views about gender roles. Rural areas are in a vicious circle of people leaving, facilities disappearing and staying behind in development which is hard to break. Abe's administration

tried to implement the virtuous cycle in which jobs attract people and people attract jobs but it hasn't been very successful.

Whenever population crisis, work styles, work-life balance and regional economies were discussed in the documents, the focus was largely on women. This is because Japanese society is characterized by obvious disparity between men and women, both in urban and rural areas but even more in rural locations. Furthermore, the documents state that work-life needs to change in order for young people and couples to achieve the kind of life they want to live. Although, having children is heavily promoted in the documents since Japanese population is rapidly decreasing.

Work is described through the major problems in Japanese work environment: discrimination of women and elderly, employers' reluctance for work style reform and deaths caused by overwork, *karoshi*. The documents discuss that the traditional management model is not as popular anymore and workers want more casual work styles. Still it seems that companies, especially smaller ones, are reluctant to change the 'Japanese-style' of working. Employers' attitudes are in the way of realising new work styles. It seemed that the focus of work style reform was quite strongly on women and elderly in the documents. Furthermore, making the employees spend long hours at the office is in fact not beneficial to the company: the documents state that due to excessive working hours employees' productivity actually decreases. Also, women's abilities are not fully acknowledged or utilized in rural areas. They also have difficulty to balance work and family life since childcare options are limited, and on top of work and taking care of the children, women are expected to take care of the home as well. While women have more options for work in metropolitan areas, they are often discriminated and forced to settle for irregular work. Men, on the other hand, seemed to be more inclined to move to rural areas and do telework, but because of Japan's poor wireless network, telework is not always possible. The necessary actions mentioned in the documents that Japanese government needs to take to develop their working environment are:

1. activation of women and elderly
2. more women in the agriculture and fisheries industry
3. diverse workstyles need to be offered (work style reform)
4. support for young people in their journey to work life after graduation

5. dealing with *karoshi* (less work leads to better results)
6. developing work-life support such as childcare facilities
7. enabling high-speed wireless LAN all around Japan
8. addressing the attitudes towards gender roles

The broader purpose of this study was to increase understanding of Japanese work culture: what are the steps that have led to the current situation of work environment in Japan and how it has been discussed by the Japanese government in recent years. I hope that this thesis gives inspiration and possible guidelines for future research. For example, future research could study the concrete implementation of the guidelines in Comprehensive Strategy and Long-Term Vision documents at local level. Also, the shift from the way Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's cabinet handled regional revitalization policies to, for example, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's regional revitalization policies is another possible topic for further research.

The impact of COVID-19 was mentioned in Comprehensive Strategy from 2020 but it is not discussed in large detail in this thesis, because the pandemic had been going on only for a year at the time the Comprehensive Strategy 2020 policy paper was published. The most interesting change that COVID-19 brought about in the work field was the sudden increase of telework. However, the main point of the analysis about work in Japanese society is in the years preceding the pandemic and that is why COVID-19 does not receive more attention in this thesis. However, this presents a possibility for further research. It would be interesting to know how much the pandemic affected telework and if telework becomes an integral part of Japanese work culture sometime in the future.

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