

# Characteristics of and Challenges Facing the Widespread Regional Organizations That Form As a Result of a Declining and Aging Population — Based on an Analysis of Leading Cases —

Ryuichi FUKUDA

## 1. Objectives of the present study

In addition to conducting farm management, agricultural communities in Japan have begun functioning as cooperative systems that are connected intimately to people's lives. However, with a weakening of community functions, particularly in upland and mountainous areas, there is apprehension in many villages regarding the destruction of regional resources and collapse of the bedrock of permanent residency.

Given this state of affairs, in recent years, many communities have not only pulled together in an effort to deal with difficult activities but also formed widespread regional organizations to provide comprehensive agricultural and lifestyle support. In the present study, we concentrated on widespread regional organizations formed as a result of the reorganization of communities and gained an understanding of this trend as well as these organizations' traits and characteristics.

## 2. Shrinking communities and community functions

The relationship between the size of agricultural communities (the number of farm households and their members making up a community) and their functions is evident. Previous research and studies have presented this relationship using the concept model shown in Figure 1. According to Odagiri (2009), who created this diagram, despite a reduction in household and population numbers, community functions would be maintained initially; however, when the number of households and population falls by half, there would be a corresponding deterioration in functions. Eventually, there would be an immediate decline in community functions once a certain critical point has been reached. Following this critical point, communities would start to lose the population of the remaining residents, consisting largely of senior citizens. Measures aimed at addressing the deterioration in community features that accompanies declining household and population numbers involves reorganization of the community.

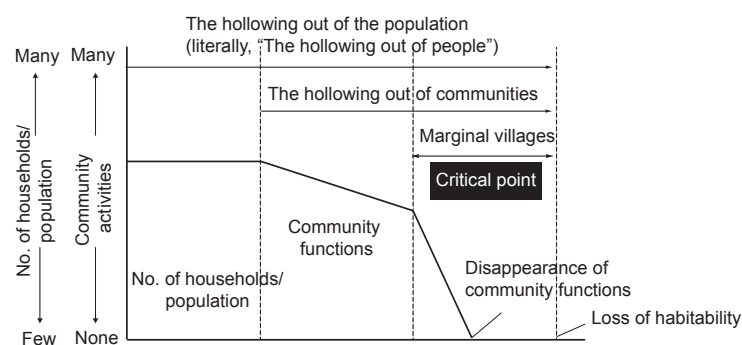


Figure 1. Relationship between depopulation/fewer number of households and deterioration in community functions

Data: Created based on diagram #5 in "Reviving Small-Scale Aging Communities," a research paper by Kasamatsu (2009, p. 74) of the Shimane Prefecture Research Center for Upland Regions, and the diagram in "Overcoming Depopulation in Rural Villages," by Odagiri (2009, p. 48).

## 3. Widespread regional organization trends

According to the survey conducted by Sakamoto, et al. (2013), 27.4% of the responding cities reported the establishment of widespread regional organizations (referred to as "regional management organizations" in the survey). Moreover, over half of widespread regional organizations were established after 2000, with primary schools making up approximately 60% of these organizations. After examining the activities of widespread municipal regional organizations located in rural areas, it was found that their ratio of preservation and maintenance of cultural traditions, economic activity, agricultural support, and municipal-agricultural exchanges was higher than that of other areas. In addition, as part of administrative support for widespread regional organizations, assistance and grants were provided, management of public facilities was outsourced, and a large number of administrative officers were dispatched.

## 4. Characteristics of and challenges facing widespread regional organizations

Disputes surrounding widespread regional organizations can be roughly categorized into the following three themes. The first involves the organizational form of widespread regional organizations. Widespread regional organizations involve many cases in which the local-government functions of existing communities are left intact and reorganized by function. Considering the section meeting and committee system as organizational forms, we can see that widespread regional organizations form a type of unified organization.

The second involves the content of the activities of widespread regional organizations. Widespread regional organizations are positioned as integrated business entities engaged in various projects, involving both for-profit and not-for-profit groups. Balancing these two is critical to the continuation of these organizations.

The third involves the training and retention of professionals tasked with managing widespread regional organizations. These are

leaders managing their organizations and hands-on organizational professionals. It is important to consider how much training and retention is involved for each. In addition, professionals need to be brought in from outside.

## 5. Examples of widespread regional organizations

### (1) Formation of widespread regional organizations lead by local government

Here, we will consider three issues raised by the study's results regarding six widespread regional organizations (Table 1) from three prefectures (Akita Prefecture, Kyoto Prefecture, and Yamaguchi Prefecture).

The first issue is regarding organizational form. All cases in the three prefectures involved organizational formation along the lines of section meeting and committee system, with the local-government functions of existing communities left intact and reorganized by function. Upon further examination, participants in activities of widespread regional organizations were found to consist partly of citizens; breaking points were also noted for widespread regional organizations.

The second issue concerns the content of the activities themselves. Widespread regional organizations led by the local government are made up largely of recent start-ups. Compared to economically meaningful projects, they emphasize the organization of easy-to-initiate, wide-ranging events and the application/management of regional resources.

The third issue concerns the training and retention of professional staff. A portion of in-house staff consists of local citizens; external professionals providing support to these citizens consist mainly of personnel from the local government. Local instigators, as used in Kyoto Prefecture, are critical in retaining outside professionals.

Table 1. Status of six cases related to the issue of widespread regional organizations

|                      |               | Organization formation                              | Substance of activities                                                                      | Training and retaining professional talent<br>(supported by local government)                                                                                                           |
|----------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Akita Prefecture     | The AA region | General meeting + two section meetings              | Events held<br>Maintaining/managing regional resources                                       | Support of municipal office staff                                                                                                                                                       |
|                      | The AB region | Community representative meeting + three committees | Events held<br>Maintaining/managing regional resources<br>Coordination with private stands   | Support of municipal office staff<br>Meetings held at night to allow working people to participate                                                                                      |
| Kyoto Prefecture     | The KA region | Four committees                                     | Management of regional institutions/operations and finance operations projects               | Dispatching of prefectural staff in support of local professionals and that of outside professionals in support of local instigators as a part of the prefecture's local aid operations |
|                      | The KB region | Five general committees + two special committees    | Events held<br>Permanent residency assistance<br>Maintaining/managing regional resources     |                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Yamaguchi Prefecture | The YA region | Executive offices + three section meetings          | Holding events<br>Maintaining/managing regional resources                                    | Assistance provided by municipal office staff members and community supporters<br>Collaboration with universities by means of prefectural projects                                      |
|                      | The YB region | Executive offices + four section meetings           | Holding events<br>Maintaining/managing regional resources<br>Social and business initiatives | Support for group members tasked with area revitalization<br>Dispatching coordinators for prefectural projects                                                                          |

Data: Created by the author based on materials created by each widespread regional organization and interviews.

### (2) Formation of widespread regional organizations led by citizens

Finally, we present two examples of widespread regional organizations formed as a result of the leadership of citizen organizations (Table 2) and compare the resulting main constituents and their group characteristics.

First, let us look at the main founding constituents. Both organizations were aware of the crisis prior to the establishment of the widespread regional organizations; however, the constituents raising these concerns differed. This difference in opinion may affect what transpires thereafter. For example, even though one organization has a crisis mentality, if the citizens that make up the main constituents for activities do not sense such a crisis, no vigorous activity may ensue.

Second, we look at the characteristics of the group. Citizen groups consist of autonomous organizations in which citizens participate as well as functional organizations in which specified individuals participate. If the sense of urgency of the citizens serves as motivation, both the main founding constituents and action constituents can be considered equally desirable. Moreover, action constituents may find functional groups easier to implement. If this is the case, then effective actions can be anticipated for the R convention.

Table 2. Overview of the R region and R convention as well as the S district and the S region's academies

|                            |                                                           | 〈R region〉                                                                                                                                          | 〈S district〉                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Regional overview          | Households and population                                 | 1,875 households 7,150 people                                                                                                                       | 9 villages 127 households 500 people (as of March 31, 2014)                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                            | Population ratio                                          | 32.8%                                                                                                                                               | 31%                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                            | Total number of farming families/administered arable land | 1,171 households                                                                                                                                    | 96 households                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                            |                                                           | 〈R convention〉                                                                                                                                      | 〈S region's academies〉                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Organization attributes    | Organization configuration                                | Incorporated not-for-profit organization                                                                                                            | Voluntary organizations                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                            | Organizational scope                                      | Former towns (villages consolidated during the Showa era)                                                                                           | Former villages (domain villages)                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                            | Establishment of a base                                   | Rest area and Regional Vitalization Center                                                                                                          | Cultural exchange facility, Branch Office S of Agricultural Cooperative D                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                            | Details of the establishment                              | Consolidated municipalities                                                                                                                         | An appeal from Agricultural Cooperative D: with municipal consolidation, a changeover from regional agricultural investigative commissions to regional academies                                                                                |
| Organization configuration | Organization configuration                                | Organizations of former towns are organized by their various objectives.                                                                            | Composed of representatives of existing agriculture-related organizations                                                                                                                                                                       |
|                            | Number of members                                         | 270                                                                                                                                                 | -                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Organizational activities  | Activity details                                          | Regional development, green tourism, promotion of permanent residency, facility management, processed goods manufacturing, farm-fresh produce, etc. | Management and operation of cultural exchange facilities; child-planning events during summer vacation; participation in PR events in Tokyo, Nagoya, and other major cities; and management and acquisition of regional organization trademarks |
|                            | Project income and expenditures                           | Roughly ¥100 million in income, exceeds income                                                                                                      | Roughly ¥6.7 million                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                            | Project application, etc.                                 | Application of subsidized projects for prefectures and cities                                                                                       | City and agricultural cooperative assistance payments, a portion of common initiative activities of direct payment systems for upland areas and other regions                                                                                   |
|                            | Project effects                                           |                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                            | People                                                    | Permanent residence of outside professionals (19 groups, 31 individuals) and employment utilizing the project                                       | Nurturing professional talent in isolated areas                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                            | Agricultural land, facilities                             | Development of special products and preservation of unused agricultural land by means of loans (48 ha between 2005 and 2010)                        | Establishment of cultural exchange institutions                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                            | Coordination with affiliated organizations                | Coordination with organizations that provide direct payment to upland areas                                                                         | Branch Office S of Agricultural Office D serves as the executive office, with municipalities also participating in events and working with tea production cooperatives in the region                                                            |

Data: Created based on [Region R] the national census and agricultural and forestry census, [Council R] Council R's documents and interviews, [S district] agricultural and forestry census and market statistics, and [S region academies] S region's academy-related materials and interviews.