



Empowerment of Rural Community and its Resilience: A Case Study of a Small-Scale Rural Community in a Mountainous Area in Japan

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Abstract Japanese rural communities have experienced an aging population with a drastic decline in its size while more economic functions and workplaces have become concentrated in urban areas. Some rural communities in remote mountainous areas even face the further serious problem of extinction of their own community. Even with such a difficult situation, some rural communities have been successful in achieving the migration of their young generation back to their rural areas, and even in reviving their energy year by year. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate how rural communities in remote mountainous areas in Japan can become empowered and resilient regardless of the serious threat of further depopulation and marginal settlement through a case study of a small-scale rural community in a remote mountainous area of Miyazaki Prefecture, Japan. The paper first overviews how rural communities have experienced depopulation over time together with changes in livelihood along with changes in lifestyle. Then, by describing how a small community in the study area was challenged to implement a series of projects by themselves, utilizing their local resources and cultures, it explains how a depopulated community could revive and gain confidence in themselves while receiving a lot of attention from visitors from outside. The study results show that the aged female population in the community is the key human resource as they can actually play an important role in the rural community, producing local valuable products and services. Moreover, the study points out the importance of maintaining and passing on rural communities' identities to the next generations, while explaining why some of the young population now choose to live in such remote rural areas – a shelter from the overly globalized and industrialized modern society.

Keywords community empowerment, resilience of rural community, small-scale community in mountainous area, aged population

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to stimulate the frank discussion that is required if researchers, practitioners and policymakers of any nation under the economic development stage are to work effectively with rural communities in responding to the possible transitional changes impacting rural declines over time. This paper describes the experience of, and lessons learned from, a small-scale rural community that experienced serious declines in the last 50 years but struggled to sustain the community.

The notion of rural decline in Japan since the 1960s (i.e. due to the rapid economic growth and change in industrial structure that happened around the 1960s) is firmly established in the literature (Ono, 2005; Odagiri, 2009), and is supported by demographic trends that depict many small rural communities in remote, hilly and mountainous areas gradually shrinking in population, making the community age as well. Odagiri (2009) pointed out that the “decline” has been particularly witnessed in three dimensions, namely i) population reduction, ii) abandoned agricultural and forestry land, and iii) weakened community functions, leading to a loss of pride in one's own community. An economic and population imbalance has also been found between large cities and smaller remote rural communities in Japan. There are similar concerns about the fate of small rural communities as

economic and demographic pressures have also been noted in many developed countries in Europe, North America and Australia (Forth and Howell, 2002; McManus et al., 2012).

What this paper wants to focus on is not the decline itself but critical factors involved in sustaining the rural communities regardless of the serious threat of their extinction with gradual emptying and aging at a high rate. To explore the possible efforts made by rural communities to react to the pressures of rural declines, this paper pays close attention to the key concepts of “resilience” and “community empowerment” by analyzing the real case of one small-scale rural community in a mountainous area in Japan.

“Resilience” and “Community Empowerment”

Japan’s depopulating rural communities received significant attention when a report, the so-called “Masuda Report,” was released in May 2014. The report predicted that almost half of the municipalities might disappear due to a population decline and weakened administrative functions. “Municipalities at risk of extinction,” mostly located in rural areas, have been listed and the urgent need to cope with rural community issues cannot be avoided, with words like “revitalization” and “renewal” being used in the policy arena in Japan. Throughout this debate, Japan has experienced other kinds of negative impacts brought about exogenously that have often hit rural communities (such as huge natural disasters, for example the Great East Japan Earthquake), and the concept of “resilience” has been debated (Itonaga, 2012; Hattorie et al., 2013).

Resilience is a complex concept, being used as an ecological term (i.e. the ability of a system to regain the status quo after a major shock), and extended to other domains and applied in social contexts where resilience is understood as the capacity to adapt seamlessly to largely exogenous events (McManus et al., 2012). The critical feature of the notion of resilience is the idea that there are some factors about a rural community that enable it to cope with changing circumstances. Such “factors” can be social capital (Putnam, 1993) or, more specifically, trust and norms of reciprocity (Bridger and Alter, 2006), but they cannot be simplified and based on a single factor. Rather, this paper suggests that communities are empowered through a number of events involving the participation of all community members, increasing confidence and the mutual respect of people living in a depopulated and aged rural community.

The concept of empowerment originates from the effort of a local community or marginal people to gain power, leaving their voiceless or powerless conditions behind (Sianipar et al., 2013; Sutawa, 2012). To discuss how a rural community can cope with a changing environment, especially when the weakening function of the community is under serious threat, this paper attempts to demonstrate how a community can be empowered even under the situation of depopulation and aging.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how rural communities in remote mountainous areas in Japan can become empowered and resilient regardless of the serious threat of further depopulation and marginal settlement through a case study of a small-scale rural community in the remote mountainous area of Miyazaki Prefecture, Japan (Fig. 1). By looking closely at the case of a small-scale rural community of less than 100 people, this paper tackles the following research questions: 1) How has the depopulation of the community evolved over time?; and 2) What triggered the community to revive themselves, and how has the community been empowered? By analyzing the results, this paper attempts to discuss critical factors for resilience in fighting back from rural declines.

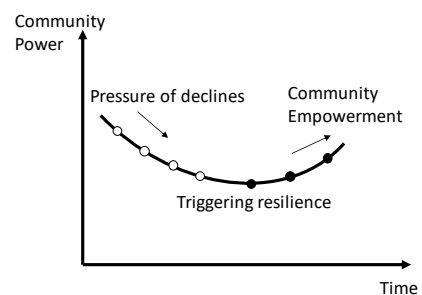


Fig. 1 Rural declines, resilience and community empowerment

RESEARCH METHOD AND THE STUDY TARGET

The study is conducted based on a series of field observations carried out since 2016, interview surveys held in August 2016, July 2019 and September 2019, and documents collected from the target community and village.

When the land of Japan is classified into the four categories of i) urban areas, ii) flat farming areas, iii) hilly farming areas and iv) mountainous farming areas, in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery in Japan, hilly and mountainous areas (i.e. iii and iv) account for about 36% of the total farming area and output (MAFF, 2017). The study target community is located in the village of *Nishimera*, Miyazaki Prefecture, in the Kyushu region of Japan. Approximately 88% of the prefectural land is hilly and mountainous and about 37% of the prefectural population reside there (Miyazaki Prefecture, 2019). Among the 26 municipal cities, towns and villages of Miyazaki Prefecture, *Nishimera* village has the smallest population with 1,132 people (580 households) as of October 2019, and 96% of the land is categorized as mountainous areas. The village has eight traditional communities, and this study focuses on one of those, “*Ogawa Community*,” which is located about 40 minutes from the village center by car, and it takes more than 1.5 hours to reach the nearest commercial area. The *Ogawa Community* has a population of 92 people. This community has experienced drastic population declines over the last 50 years and has been implementing a number of projects to revive its own community for 20 years. The study focuses on the case of *Ogawa Community* to demonstrate the critical factors required for a small-scale rural community to be resilient regardless of the long-term socio-economic change brought about from outside the community.

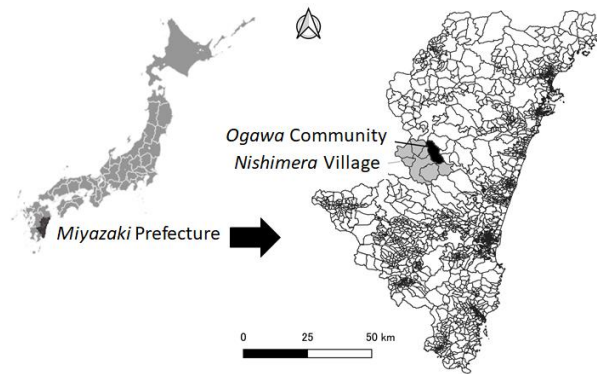


Fig.2 Location of *Ogawa Community*, *Nishimera Village*, *Miyazaki*, *Japan*

RESULTS

History and Transitional Change of *Ogawa Community* (RQ1: How has Depopulation Evolved Over Time?)

The *Ogawa Community* has a long history as the center of *Nishimera* Village with the feudal lords' residence (i.e. castle) having been there for about 200 years in the *Edo* era with. The shrine of the community is said to have been built about 500 years ago. At the time of the *Meiji* restoration in the 1860s, the landlord (i.e. the feudal lord) had kindly allocated all his forest land to local dwellers equally, making people's livelihood quite stable. With such forestry resources, the community traditionally had a unique way of living with two residences, one in the forest (called a *Sakugoya*) and the other in a residential community center. Table 1 shows the transitional changes experienced in the *Ogawa Community* over the last 50 years. There was a drastic population movement since 1960 from rural communities to urban areas due to changes in the industrial structure in the high economic growth period and the stagnant wood prices due to imported wood caused the forest industry to shrink and the population in forest areas to decrease. The *Ogawa Community* also followed the trend, and it has about 550 people left from the community in 50 years. As the working-age population migrated out of the community during the high economic growth period, the people who were left in the village 50 years later became old, while less and less children were born in the community, leading to school close, making difficult situation for younger generations to continue to stay or to come back there.

Table 1 Changes in the local situation along with modernization and forestry declines

Year: Population	Local situation, lifestyle, etc.	Events and trends in Japan
1960: about 650	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People had a traditional lifestyle of staying at their cottage for forestry work, and coming back to their official house to live in <i>Ogawa</i> Community. - Neighboring communities had been submerged due to reservoir construction. (Many construction workers came to construct the dam.) - 1970s: Rapid forestry decline and forestry work did not require many laborers anymore due to technological improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Early 1960s: Crude oil imports were liberalized, and petroleum replaced coal as the main player in Japan's energy. - Timber self-sufficiency: 87% - 1970s: Rapid increase in the number of private cars and vehicles.
1980: about 250	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modern work style with one house, commuting by cars to fields, was commonly found. -1980: % of population aged 65 or older in <i>Nishimera</i> village: 13.6%. -1989: Primary and Junior school closed due to lack of students (no high school in the village). -1994: Public bus service to the community has terminated its operation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timber self-sufficiency: 32%. - Continuous decline in timber prices (imported timber becomes dominant in the market).
2000: about 120	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -2000: % of population aged 65 or older in <i>Ogawa</i> Community and <i>Nishimera</i> village is 71% and 36%, respectively. => 63% and 41% in 2010, respectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timber self-sufficiency: 18%.

Note: Source of timber self-sufficiency rate is "Learning Museum of the Forest and Forestry," and source of % of population aged 65 or older is from *Nishimera Village documents for Ogawa*, and from *e-stat.com* for *Nishimera* village.

Community's Initiative and Community Empowerment (RQ2: What Triggered the Community to Revive Themselves, and how the Community has been Empowered?)

In 2000, *Nishimera* village officers came to explain about the estimated future population of the *Ogawa* Community, informing dwellers: "[T]his community will be extinct if the current situation continues." People were shocked and held many meetings, discussing what they should do. Having gained a consensus among all the dwellers of the community that they could not die without taking any action, the local people decided to utilize what they had locally; specifically, they used their hands to collect resources from the forest (i.e. edible wild plants). Having collected these forest resources, they decided to hold a festival, serving the local resources to visitors. All the dwellers of the community participated in the festival, and there were about 300 visitors in the first year. Due to its popularity, the number increased to more than 1000 in the second year. In receiving more visitors from outside communities (10 times more visitors than its population), local people started to realize that their traditional food, culture and even their lifestyle were unique in the view of outsiders, who placed high value on their culture, which led local people to grow in confidence. After several years, they started to say: "Festivals are held once a year, but why can't we hold something every day, and receive more guests?" With this in mind, a preparatory committee to develop community projects was first established among community members in 2005. This was followed by the community's official management organization established in 2007, and finally the launching of restaurants and guesthouses to share their traditional food and lifestyle with guests throughout the year, which were to be operated and managed by local people in 2009. When people began to discuss what was to be started up, they thought they didn't have anything special, and presented the simple idea of opening a restaurant serving popular food, like *Udon* noodles, which are available anywhere in Japan. However, after consulting with various supporters, including village officers, people started to recognize that their traditional food and even their olden-days' lifestyle were absolutely unique outside their community, and therefore of value to the majority of guests coming from cities. With such findings, people decided to name their initiative *Sakugoya*, their traditional work cottage (second house) in the mountains, thereby maintaining and cherishing their traditions and local identities. With this philosophy, people decided to utilize the historical area of the *Ogawa* Community,

creating a restaurant and guesthouses built in the traditional way as shown in Fig. 3. Moreover, community members were stunned by the results of their operation as the number of visitors rose as high as 25,000 in 2012, and economic benefits were also brought to the community, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

It should be noted that as the main community's workforce comprised elderly female dwellers, the restaurant was managed by 10 elderly women with an average age of 72.3 years as of 2016. These old women who used to work in the mountains and on farmland now started to receive guests from many places, even from foreign countries, and they became very busy every day, cooking in the restaurant kitchen, chatting to visitors, coworking with many other neighbors as colleagues and being appreciated by community members. Such people often say that they feel happy to contribute to their own community. In addition to local people's initiatives, the village office supported the community by constructing houses to receive new dwellers, leading to the arrival of 26 migrants since 2009, including three families with children. The peaceful style of traditional living surrounded by nature and forest land attracted a number of younger people who placed importance on quality of life. With these new dwellers, the percentage of the population aged 65 or older was reduced to 58% in 2019.



Fig. 3 Ogawa Sakugoya

Source: The author edited the picture taken from <https://www.ogawasakugoya-village.com> (accessed Jan. 09, 2020).

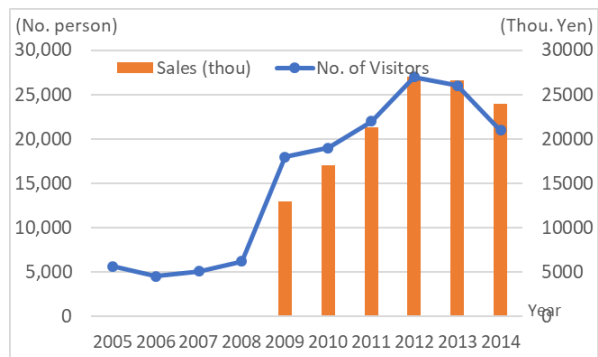


Fig. 4 No. of visitors and sales

Source: Data from 2005 to 2008 are taken from village office document, and data since 2009 from Ogawa Sakugoya.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the experience and lessons learned from the case demonstrated above, at least two important factors are to be pointed out in relation to rural community resilience. When the socio-economic situation changes over time as a result of a weakening forest industry along with progressing globalization and a lifestyle shifted to the modern way, the rural communities can be marginalized to a very small level if local people continue to make their livelihood through business as usual, but such communities can be empowered against such pressures when local people possess the willingness to sustain their community. Such willingness can be turned into a collective power, making the community as a whole change themselves in order to move forwards. The sense of crisis shared unanimously triggers a series of actions taken by local dwellers. The first important factor is the shared vision among all community members that they do not wish to see their community become extinct but rather that their community succeeds into the next generation, as such a shared vision drives the community as a whole to move forward in the same direction.

Second, there existed “unrecognized” local resources, which became the strength for the community to gain power. For instance, local people did not recognize the edible wild plants available in their forest and that their traditional healthy cuisine, which they ate every day, had such value for people in cities. Moreover, there were many old and hard-working women who lived in the community. As many of the female dwellers typically performed unpaid work or did a relatively less well-paid job in the forest, on farms and in houses growing trees, vegetables and cooking, many male decision-makers in the rural community might have not recognize that such old female members could bring such benefits to the community. Having seen the participation of all community members,

the aged female population in the depopulated community is now recognized as a key human resource as they can actually play an important role, producing local valuable products and services.

Last, but not least, the study results indicated that many people in cities were attracted by rural traditional values, with even younger generations migrating back to rural communities in remote mountainous areas. Those young generations now seek to enrich their life by enjoying craftsmanship utilizing natural resources, and even being part of a community of members whose connection is based on trust. Rural communities that still retain their local identities are opposed to standardized and regulated norms of a globalized modern society. Such communities may offer places to stay for people who are looking for real richness of human life surrounded by a rich culture and natural resources from which to self-supply their own food and satisfy their needs for their everyday life.

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