

Japan's Forgotten Countryside: Demographic Crisis and Revival Strategies

Alexander Aurich
MiraCosta College
January 15th, 2025

Introduction

What happens when a nation famed for its cultural richness and close-knit communities begins to decay—not from war or famine, but from a demographic implosion? For Japan, this is not a hypothetical question but a stark reality. In 2017, The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research predicted that in the next 50 years, Japan’s population would decline by 30%. A 2023 revision predicted a further decline in fertility with only slight increases in life expectancy and net migration to alleviate it. Japan is in a very severe national crisis and while the impact of this crisis in cities is temporarily mitigated by their economic wealth, metropolitan areas such as Tokyo are projected to share the economic and infrastructural strains of the countryside, with the aging rate of Tokyo predicted to eclipse the national average by 2050 (Nippon Sosei Kaigi Metropolitan Issues Subcommittee, 2015; Kramer, 2012).

Nowhere is this issue more acute than in the rural regions of Japan. In Tokushima Prefecture, for instance, some municipalities have seen their population decline by more than half since the 1950s (Yoshimoto, 2017). Rural areas of Japan face a unique challenge since the declining population is perpetuated by national factors, such as aging demographics and declining birth rates, and regional ones such as youth out-migration. These demographic shifts often lead to job losses, shrinking local economies, and declining local infrastructure such as schools, healthcare services, and transportation. Additionally, approximately 20% of people aged 65 and older live alone nationwide which highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions in rural areas, where elderly typically make up 30 to 40% of the total population (Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, 2022; Kushida, 2024). This isolation has led to the growing prevalence of *kodokushi*, or lonely death, a phenomenon where elderly individuals living alone pass away unnoticed, remaining undiscovered for weeks or even months.

The issue of depopulation in Japan differs from other nations in a few ways. First, Japan had one of the shortest post-war baby booms, lasting only three years, compared to the United States, where it spanned approximately eighteen years. The slow decline of Japan’s birth-rate since this post-war baby boom and a generally older population indicate that both Japan’s demographic and economic structure will experience drastic change in the near future, particularly as more people reach the retirement age of 60 and become eligible for public pensions and healthcare benefits (Mae 2024; Hong and Schneider 2020). Moreover, Japan leads the world in life expectancy which increases the dependency ratio and reduces the proportion of taxable working-age individuals, causing reduced benefits, raises in retirement age, and tax hikes (Kramer, 2012; Hara, 2014). Lastly, unlike other G7 countries, Japan cannot rely on immigration to cure its demographic woes. Foreign workers only accounted for approximately 1.8% of Japan’s total labor force in 2023, as opposed to 17.4% and 17% in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively (Yokoyama 2024; Labour Force Survey 2024).

Once these types of demographic trends emerge, they become exceedingly difficult to mitigate and reverse. The issue in rural Japan offers a preview of what could very likely escalate into a severe national crisis. The countryside finds itself in a vicious cycle of rapid population and economic decline, as infrastructural challenges only make these regions increasingly inaccessible and unattractive to prospective residents. According to Hiroya Masuda, a visiting professor at University of Tokyo Graduate School and former governor of Iwate Prefecture, even if Japan's birthrate of 1.42 were to reach the replacement level of 2.1—defined by the National Institute of Health—within the next seventeen years, the nation's population would not stop declining for another 60 years. By that time, the population of child-rearing age women in many rural municipalities is projected to decrease by more than half (Hiroya, 2014; Population Strategy Council, 2024).

Despite the multitude of issues plaguing Japan regionally and nationally, rural regions are not without potential. The effects of depopulation are undeniably concerning with the collapse of traditional industries such as agriculture, augmented by trade liberalization and global competition. However, there are still efforts emerging across Japan to revitalize the countryside. This paper will examine the regional consequences of depopulation, evaluating the success and shortcoming of adaptive local policies to discover strategies that could inform scalable, sustainable solutions to Japan's broader demographic crisis.

Causes of Population Decline

The primary factors of Japan's depopulation crisis are its naturally aging population and declining birth rate, both of which have reached critical levels. Japan has one of the oldest populations in the world, with 29.3% of its residents aged 65 years or older per 2024 estimates, compared to only 18.5% and 19.3% in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2024, Central Intelligence Agency, 2024). Worsening this is Japan's fertility rate which sits far beneath the replacement level of 2.1, with only 1.26 births per woman in 2022 (Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, 2023). The effects of these trends are reflected in recent data: per every 1,000 people, Japan has 6.4 births but 11.9 deaths (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024). These imbalances are projected to grow, causing a shrinking labor force, increasing dependency ratios, and mounting pressure on the government to take definitive action to reverse the effects.

Furthermore, the draw of urban areas has caused severe overconcentration in Japan's major cities, with approximately 92% of the country's population living in urban areas (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024; Sakemoto & Tottori City Planning Promotion Department, 2024). The urban migration is driven by a combination of economic, educational, and social opportunities, and has exacerbated regional challenges with depopulation. Cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya offer higher wages, more stable career prospects, and access to the nation's

top universities and companies which creates a magnetic pull for young people after high school. Moreover, urban areas provide better healthcare infrastructure, vibrant cultural scenes, and extensive public transportation networks, making them particularly appealing to younger generations.

Despite various government initiatives, Japan has struggled to create an environment conducive to child-rearing. Two main factors contribute to this: the rigid work culture and rising financial burden of raising children.

Japan's hierarchical work culture, based on loyalty, seniority, and group harmony, has historical merits in fostering economic growth and stability (Hite & Hawes, 1991). However, it has also presented significant challenges in establishing work-life balances and family planning, leaving many employees disillusioned with jobs where merits often feel undervalued when compared to experience. Further, concepts such as *karoshi* (death from overwork) and lifetime employment have reinforced a work environment that ranks poorly among industrialized nations. A 2023 survey by the Persol Research and Consulting Company revealed that among the G7 nations Japan ranks dead last in work satisfaction and second in average weekly hours worked, with respondents citing Japan's inflexible corporate culture as the cause (Katada, 2023).

The financial burden of raising children has also exacerbated these cultural challenges. Stagnant wages and rising inflation have made day-to-day expenses, such as food and nursery fees, increasingly unaffordable for many families. In fact, monthly child-rearing expenses just hit a record at ¥41,320 in 2024, an increase of ¥1,187 from 2023 (The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2024). Moreover, a survey from the Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance Company found that 40% of parents no longer want more children due to anxieties about future income and financial security (Tajika, 2023). Although Japan provides benefits such as free child healthcare and parenting consultations, these efforts have proven to be insufficient in countering the cultural and economic barriers of parenthood in Japan.

Effects of Depopulation on Local Infrastructure and Cultural Heritage

Some schools remain open for as few as two students, indicating the end of rural municipalities (Yamamitsu et al., 2023). For instance, between 2002 and 2020, about 9,000 schools closed permanently, with about 450 closing each year, making it increasingly difficult for rural areas to retain and attract younger residents (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2023). By contrast, it is common for high school students in rural areas to spend two or more hours each day commuting to school on public transportation which creates a natural pull factor towards cities that have some of the world's most robust transit networks and much more options for schools (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). The closure of schools in rural Japan

exemplifies both the decline of the countryside due to depopulation and the factors that contribute to out-migration of youth to urban centers.

Faced with a dwindling population, rural communities have turned to adaptive reuse of public spaces. Many of schools in the countryside are repurposed: in Tottori Prefecture, vacant classrooms are reused as production facilities for local entrepreneurs and have community kitchens for elderly residents (Hometown Tottori Prefecture Settlement Organization, n.d; Tochibayashi & Ota, 2024). While illustrating the resilience and resourcefulness of rural Japan, these transformations also underscore the scale of the crisis.

Public transportation has also been severely impacted by the demographic shifts. Train lines in rural regions such as the JR Hokkaido network saw their revenue peak at 80 million in 1996, then began to fall due to Hokkaido's stagnant economy, mirroring the population decline in the region (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2023). Since then, local branch lines have been shut down and replaced by more affordable bus services. Consequently, 4000 km of lines in the JR Hokkaido network was reduced to 2500 km because of the declining population and concentration of people in Sapporo, the prefecture's capital. (JR Hokkaido Management Planning Department, 2008). In comparison, urban areas such as Tokyo have vast and efficient transit networks with some lines' frequencies being as quick as one train every four minutes (East Japan Railway Company, 2024). These differences in transportation highlight the growing disparity between rural and urban regions and further illustrate the factors that bring people to Japan's cities.

Another factor to consider is the impact of depopulation on cultural heritage. In February of 2024, the city of Oshu of Iwate Prefecture held its renowned Sominsai festival, a tradition with 1200 years of history, for the final time. Despite drawing thousands of visitors annually, the festival relies heavily on a few local elderly households for funding and preparation. These preparations, involving labor-intensive tasks like chopping wood for *komagi* charms used in the event's *somin* sacks, have become unsustainable due to the aging population in the city (Hinata, 2024). Festivals are one of Japan's many invaluable cultural assets and embody community spirit and resilience of rural areas; however, as demographic challenges persist, they will only become more fragile and difficult to preserve.

Tourism

Tourism has long played a significant role in bolstering the Japanese economy. In 2023, international tourism contributed approximately ¥5.3 trillion to the Japanese economy, supporting a wide range of industries including, retail, transit, and hospitality (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024). International tourism has become a key pillar of Japan's economic strategy,

particularly for rural areas that design targeted campaigns to attract visitors and boost regional development.

However, tourism in Japan is disproportionately concentrated in regions known as the “Golden Route,” including Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka. These areas benefit from extensive infrastructure, non-Japanese language accommodations, and attractions designed to maximize foreign revenue. On the other hand, rural regions struggle to attract international visitors, leaving significant potential for economic development untapped. For instance, while Tokyo invited approximately 8 million visitors in 2023, rural prefectures such as Hyogo hosted fewer than 2 million (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024).

Efforts to address this imbalance include promoting “green tourism,” tourism that is aimed at revitalizing rural economies by highlighting Japan’s environmental richness, and other initiatives that promote the attractiveness and unique tourism resources of each region, according to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. Initiatives range from adding high-value accommodations such as *ryokans* (Japanese traditional inns) and training guides/hospitality personnel to creating high-end experiences and transportation for luxury travelers (Japan Tourism Agency, 2024). Green tourism aligns with Japan’s goals to boost regional development and their commitment to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals but it has only been moderately successful in fostering economic growth, especially when compared to similar programs in Europe where rural tourism has more significantly boosted regional economies (Chen et al., 2013). Additionally, while these approaches address the overconcentration of tourism in urban hubs and provide temporary economic relief to rural areas, they ultimately fail to tackle the underlying causes of demographic decline—specifically, low birth rates and youth out-migration.

U-turners

When assessing revitalization initiatives, understanding who relocates to rural areas is crucial. Studies indicate that U-turners, or individuals returning to their rural hometowns from cities, constitute the majority of new rural residents. According to Lee and Sugiura (2014) in a case study of Hirosaki, a rural city in Aomori Prefecture, U-turners consisted of nearly 70% of rural in-migrants, with 90% citing the presence of parents or a spouse’s parents as the reason for migration. Furthermore, the average age of U-turners was higher than first-time urban residents, reflecting a demographic mainly composed of mid-career professionals and retirees. These individuals typically take voluntary actions such as quitting their jobs before relocation and often report higher satisfaction levels with work-life balance, contrasting with the stress of urban living. This trend illustrates the potential for policies that emphasize familial and community reconnection to reinvigorate rural areas experiencing rapid depopulation.

Case study: Tottori Prefecture

Tottori Prefecture, the least populated prefecture of any in Japan, faces severe challenges stemming from the declining and aging demographic. As of 2020, approximately 32% of Tottori's population was aged 65 or older, and the population is predicted to steadily decline by nearly 22% over several decades (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2018). This shift has resulted in widespread labor shortages, the consolidation and closure of supermarkets, health services, and schools, and a decline in public transportation services due to reduced demand. According to Yuta Sakemoto, an official from Tottori City's Policy Planning Division, these challenges not only reduce the convenience for residents but also significantly diminish regional vitality. These issues are reflective of the broader trends affecting rural areas across Japan.

Consequently, Tottori Prefecture has implemented various government programs to mitigate these challenges for prospective residents. One-time relocation support grants are available to individuals and families moving from the Tokyo area, offering ¥600,000 (approximately \$3,800) for single individuals, ¥1,000,000 (\$6300) for households of two or more, and an additional ¥1,000,000 per child under the age of 18. While many grant recipients acknowledge that the financial support is helpful and encouraging, it is rarely the deciding factor for relocation. However, the grants have contributed to modest population inflow, with Tottori City alone inviting 330 households (473 people) in 2021, 317 households (446 people) in 2022, and 319 households (471 people) in 2023.

As a successful initiative, Sakemoto cited the online portal called "Tottori Connect" which provides detailed information on housing, employment opportunities, childcare support and testimonials from current residents. There are also dedicated counselors who offer one-stop consultations to address individual needs and ease the transition to rural living. As Sakemoto noted, the programs are intended not only to attract residents but also to create a supportive community for those relocating.

Despite these efforts, depopulation persists in the region. Sakemoto highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach that addresses both natural population decline, where deaths exceed births, and youth out-migration. To combat the low birth rate, measures such as reducing or even eliminating medical expenses for children, providing free tuition at higher education institutions, and encouraging men to take childcare leave through workplace reforms are being considered.

Furthermore, the concentration of private companies, government agencies, and universities in the Tokyo area exacerbates regional population loss. To counter this, Tottori City advocates for initiatives by the national government, such as relocating private companies and government-related agencies to rural areas which would strengthen regional infrastructure and

promote telework using digital technology. Sakemoto highlighted the prefecture's mission of creating "a city where the hopes of young people come true" through redevelopment projects around Tottori Station and the establishment of satellite offices and spaces where people can work remotely in Tottori's naturally rich areas.

Tottori's focus on regional revitalization includes more than economic measures. In the town of Iwami, community programs show that there is also a large focus on accommodating and aging populations. Initiatives such as doubling seafood processing centers as cafes that use local ingredients and establishing agricultural salons, where elders can work together on miscellaneous farm work, to build community connections have been successful in engaging elderly residents.

These efforts are complemented by the contributions of regional non-profit organizations. While the prefectural government focuses on structural reforms and financial incentives, non-profits often work on smaller, community-oriented scales. These organizations are typically run by resident volunteers with limited connections to the public sector, and play vital roles in revitalization efforts for rural areas. For example, *Kofu no Tayori*, a non-profit based in the town of Kofu, connects prospective residents to vacant homes across Tottori and even offers "trial homes" that can be rented for up to three months. Such programs allow individuals to experience life in the region before committing to relocation which eases the process of moving to rural Japan.

The vision of Tottori going forward is comprehensive and continuous efforts to address population decline through economic incentives, societal reforms, and community engagement. As Sakemoto stated, combating depopulation extends beyond a single policy, it involves creating an environment that fosters opportunities and eliminates national and regional burdens on the new generation.

Case study: Akita Prefecture

Akita has had the highest rate of population decline of any prefecture in Japan in recent years, mirroring the changes in other northern regions. Current projections show that by 2045, approximately 81% of Akita residents will be 65 years or older if the current demographic trends persist (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2018). In my interview with a representative from the Akita Future Strategy Division, I learned about the main challenges Akita faces, various successful initiatives, and promising strategies for addressing declining populations going forward.

Similar to Tottori prefecture, in Akita, there were reductions in resident services and deterioration in the functionality of local communities; however, the decline in administrative services due to a decrease in tax revenue was also mentioned as a major concern. Most support

comes in the form of relocation grants for those who move to Akita Prefecture from the Tokyo Metropolitan Area (including Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa) and meet certain requirements. The prefectural government also offers subsidies for students who accrued loan debt during their post-secondary education according to their income earned after finding employment in the prefecture. Moreover, support grants are available for employees and their companies who move to Akita while working remotely and primarily in offices outside of the prefecture.

The Akita Future Strategy Division identified several successful initiatives to attract companies popular among young people and secure job opportunities which resulted in a gradual rise in employment among high school students within the prefecture. Looking ahead, they emphasized the importance of bringing in industries with potential for growth, such as offshore wind power and automobiles, to further stabilize local employment. Recognizing the challenges rural communities in Japan often face—such as strict social norms and limited inclusivity—they also proposed efforts to create a more tolerant society that accepts different ideas and values and attractive workplaces for young people. In addition, they viewed creating opportunities for people to meet for marriage, including a state-run dating service, and improving child-rearing environment as promising in making Akita more livable and attractive for younger demographics.

In the town of Gojome in Akita Prefecture, a study performed by students of the University of Tokyo's Graduate Program in Sustainability Science showed the potential of civic pride in promoting sustainability and boosting future U-turn rates. The group found that through various educational experiences, the town could boost civic pride which prompted an interest in students to return or even remain in the prefecture for their post-secondary education. One such experience was the Gojome Social Lab, a program that provided students with opportunities to learn more about the history and geography of Gojome through fieldwork. By participating in many local traditions such as local festivals and environmental activities, students developed a desire to preserve the region, admitting that they had little interest in Gojome before their research projects. Overall, the program, and similar ones in the region, supported the intergenerational connections and cultural values of the town and exemplified the potential of civic pride to improve community vitality.

Case study: Tokushima Prefecture

At Japan's Population Strategy Conference in 2024, 17 of the 24 municipalities in Tokushima Prefecture were designated as “at risk of disappearing,” the highest proportion of any prefecture in the country. This added a particularly high sense of urgency within the prefectural government to implement diverse programs to mitigate and reverse the effects. In my interview with Tatsuhiro Tada from the Prefectural Migration Exchange Office, I gained insights into the prefecture's current strategies, as well as their future direction.

The main initiative that the Tatsuhiro emphasized was the myriad outreach efforts launched by the prefecture in the form of consultation offices and migration fairs, specifically targeted at the Osaka metropolitan area and individuals with ties to the prefecture, such as former residents or local university alumni. The consultation offices come in two forms: prefectural and municipal. The prefectural offices are local in Tokushima, Osaka, and Tokyo, and are equipped with dedicated relocation concierges who provide detailed support to relocation inquiries such as housing, employment opportunities, and general information on the region. The municipal forms of these offices, called “Migration Exchange Support Centers,” are set up in all 24 municipalities within the prefecture, and were just completed as of April 1st, 2023. Similar to their prefectural counterparts, these offices offer “one-stop consultation” services for migration inquiries and provide information to prospective migrants nationwide; however, these offices also have tailored support measures designed to each municipality's regional needs in coordination with the prefectural offices.

The migration offices serve as only one measure from a diverse array of initiatives aimed at curbing demographic decline in the region. The prefecture also offers support for utilizing vacant homes, offering vacant home banks and renovation subsidies and comprehensive child-rearing support with medical expense subsidies and childcare fee reductions. They have various startup grants to support entrepreneurship. There are also specific support grants for residents and commuters relocating from Tokyo’s 23 wards for employment or to start a business, which cover moving expenses as well as additional financial assistance.

The role of non-government organizations was also acknowledged in my interview, with Tatsuhiro noting that various organizations across different regions have been engaged in migration support, working alongside municipal governments to facilitate connections between migrants and local communities. This role of NGOs in assessing the “fit” of individuals for rural living, and in easing the transition from urban life, seemed to be a common thread among the case studies. Tokushima Prefecture introduces regional organizations on their website, boasting 32 distinct organizations across six cities, five towns, and one village. These organizations also participate in national migration fairs alongside municipal governments.

Zooming in, we can see how these policies have been successfully implemented in the municipality of Kamiyama. Kamiyama’s population, already less than a third of its 1955 population of 21,000, is expected to drop to 1,960 by 2045, according to 2018 projections by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. Consequently, it was designated as one of the 17 municipalities within the prefecture that are at risk of disappearing. Among the municipalities in Tokushima, Kamiyama stands out for its residents' unique initiative that uses art as a starting point for rural revitalization and has since changed the trajectory of the small, mountainous town.

The concept of “creative depopulation,” as defined by Kamiyama resident Shinya Ominami, is the approach of developing sustainable practices that will maintain the region in the long term, even in the face of severe depopulation and aging. It focuses on planting the seeds for a future where Kamiyama can thrive instead of resorting to temporary solutions.

In Kamiyama, this approach has manifested most obviously in the Kamiyama Artist in Residence (KAIR) program. The town previously had an International Exchange association that sought to create a cultural exchange between Japan and the United States and even offered homestays for Assistant Foreign Language Teachers; however, it wasn’t until the KAIR program that the efforts started showing more results. In 1997, Tokushima Prefecture proposed the idea of an international culture village. Inspired by this, the Kamiyama International Exchange Association had the idea of an artist village, where young artists could experience the culture of the town and revitalize the town through art.

The program invites three artists, two from overseas and one from Japan, to Kamiyama and requires them to produce at least one artwork. The artists are given 150,000 yen for travel and living expenses, and up to 250,000 yen for necessary supplies. In its first year, the program only received four applicants, but, by its fourth year, it already had 170 (Yoshimoto 2017). The artworks produced remain scattered around Kamiyama and gave the artists a chance to work in the backdrop of Kamiyama’s rich natural surroundings.

To continue their endeavors in community development, the International Exchange Association became Green Valley NPO with the goal of expanding operations to include work in residence programs and other relocation services. Green Valley developed a website called “In Kamiyama” that sought to provide those interested with information on how to relocate to Kamiyama and a glimpse into what life was like there. The municipal government had established a migration interaction support center which was commonly placed in villages struggling with depopulation and run by the government, but in the case of Kamiyama, the town contracted management to Green Valley NPO.

Green Valley took an active approach to recruiting new residents, unlike other municipalities that used lotteries or operated on a first-come-first-serve basis. They use a far-sighted strategy and, instead of simply asking about the size of the family and the kind of house and property someone was looking for, asked what residents would do once they migrated to Kamiyama and evaluated proposals based on the content of their responses. This also came in light of Tokushima Prefecture’s installment of an expansive fiber-optic network in 2004 which gave the area high-speed internet and attracted IT companies that wanted to start satellite offices in the region.

To cater to IT companies, Green Valley began a renovation project which transformed abandoned homes into innovative office spaces that foster a sense of comfort among employees. Some of

these repurposed spaces even evolved into community hubs, featuring large *engawa* patios where residents could unwind and socialize (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism 2014). The repurposing of these abandoned homes marked just the beginning, as the town gradually attracted a diverse range of small businesses, including shoe stores and restaurants using locally sourced ingredients, which have revived the town's main street.

At the prefectural level, too, the government touts its top-tier fiber-optic broadband network and rich natural resources. This foundation has enabled Tokushima to push an idea they call “workation,” in which urban professionals can work remotely while enjoying the prefecture's natural surroundings. As part of this initiative, Tatsuhiko explained, Tokushima has also developed programs tailored to the prefecture's diverse needs, such as regional problem-solving, social contribution activities, and engagement opportunities for young professionals, parents, and families—with some cases even leading to successful business matching.

The cumulative efforts of Tokushima Prefecture in collaboration with municipal governments, appears to have contributed to a significant increase in migration in recent years. Annual figures rose from 1,844 migrants in 2019 to 3,246 in 2023, indicating a sustained upward trend. For their future direction, Tatsuhiko cited three key challenges. First, he emphasized curbing the net outflow of young people, particularly women, who leave the prefecture for employment after graduating from universities or other institutions. Additionally, he mentioned implementing targeted policies that are aimed at addressing the more pronounced outflow to the nearby Osaka metropolitan area was a priority. Lastly, Tatsuhiko observed that as Japan's overall population declines, competition for talent is intensifying. Even if full relocation isn't achieved, he noted the increasing importance of cultivating a “connected population,” meaning individuals who maintain long-term ties with the region through multi-location living or other forms of engagement.

In response to these challenges, the prefecture outlined several policy directions, as well. Overall, the prefecture wanted to develop attractive employment opportunities that appeal to young people and women, similar to the direction of Akita Prefecture. Tokushima also wanted to continue implementing their effective, targeted measures focused on younger demographics and the Osaka metropolitan area, highlighting their priority to local gains before developing stronger commitments to further regions like Tokyo. They also wanted to continue bolstering their outreach efforts to individuals already familiar to the prefecture, since those groups have shown to be most likely to relocate to rural prefectures (Lee & Sugiura, 2018).

Overall, Tokushima Prefecture serves as a good example of the effectiveness of satellite office spaces and the impact of non-profit organizations in rural revitalization efforts. In Kamiyama, we witness the potential and success of local initiatives complemented by the public sector that

enhance their efforts. As the trend continues, the use of satellite offices for revitalizing rural areas is expected to gain traction in other rural areas across the country.

Global Comparisons

Italy

Rural depopulation in Italy has led to the proliferation of “ghost towns,” with over 5,000 abandoned settlements nationwide (East 2017). In Sicily alone, more than 80 agricultural villages have been deserted. In 2023, the national birth rate dropped to 379,000, the lowest since the country’s unification in 1861 (National Institute of Statistics, 2024). Factors that contribute to this issue include the Catholic Church’s influence on traditional family dynamics, such as the historical emphasis on stay-at-home motherhood, and insufficient social services which makes it difficult for families, particularly mothers, to balance work and having children. Gender inequality plays a critical role in perpetuating Italy’s demographic decline (Kramer, 2012). A lack of state-funded childcare exacerbates these challenges. Recently, Pope Francis has actively advocated for family-friendly policies, calling on politicians to take concrete action to address the financial burden of childrearing (Matranga, 2023). In addition, the European Union has called for far-reaching social innovations that advocate for economic and childcare support to empower working mothers.

Additionally, Italy’s depopulation challenges have historical roots in its fascist legacy. For instance, Benito Mussolini’s tax on celibate men left a cultural reluctance to directly intervene in family affairs. However, some promising initiatives are emerging. Italy’s promotion of organic agriculture, for example, has shown success in revitalizing rural communities. In 2023, the area dedicated to organic farming increased by 4.5% from the previous year, increasing organic agriculture to approximately 20% of Italy’s total agricultural land (Ferrucci & Passeri, 2024). The growth of organic farming has led Italy to use it as a tool for rural development and the maintenance of small farms, something Japan has struggled with (Simona, 2024). These measures, if implemented widely, could play a critical role in reversing Italy’s population decline and serve as a model for Japan, where similar cultural and economic dynamics exist.

Similar to Italy, individuals moving from urban to rural areas in Japan often come to start farming (Milone & Ventura, 2019). The experience of organic agriculture in Italy can provide a useful example of how similar policies can be implemented in Japan, bolstering an industry that is already a cornerstone of rural life. The insights are particularly valuable in light of the Japanese government’s introduction of the Strategy for Sustainable Food Systems (MIDORI) in 2021, which aims to increase Japan’s organic farmland by 25% by 2050 (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2021). The revival of agriculture in rural Japan provides a significant opportunity to revitalize the countryside without compromising the industrial makeup of the

region.

France

Before World War II, France's declining population was considered a national security issue. Many French leaders attributed their country's defeat to Nazi Germany to their low birth rate compared to Germany's postwar baby boom. After the war, France began to implement policies that transformed into a model for demographic recovery in Europe.

An integral part of France's success was its comprehensive support system for families, particularly its advocacy for women to reconcile work and family. Mothers receive generous financial incentives and the government offers an exceptional free preschool through the Ministry of Education, which most children enroll in by age three (Kramer, 2012). These measures not only removed the financial burden of child-rearing but also allowed mothers to return to the workforce without compromising the quality of childcare. Until recent years, France has enjoyed one of the highest fertility rates in the European Union, remaining consistently between 1.8 and 2 children per woman after the mid-1970s. France devotes approximately four percent of its GDP to supporting families, the second highest in the EU, compared to Japan which dedicates around 1.5 percent (UN Population Division, 2015). In response to recent declines in their birth rate, France is taking a similar approach through reforming parental leave—namely, improving pay during leave and enabling both parents to be with their children for six months (Thomas, 2024).

France's success highlights the importance of reconciling work and family life. Municipal governments in Japan's rural regions could draw lessons from France by introducing free childcare programs and expanding daycare services. Nationally, mandating free or heavily subsidized child care could encourage higher birth rates, particularly in regions experiencing the most severe depopulation. In Tokyo, city officials have already made day care services free to boost regional birth rates (The Japan Times, 2024). Coupled with Japan's existing robust health services, such policies seem highly promising and could emulate France's model of demographic stabilization and growth.

Conclusions

Solving the depopulation crisis in Japan requires an integrated strategy that harmonizes tradition with innovation and prioritizes the preservation of cultural heritage. While current efforts have made strides, they have yet to produce transformative results that significantly reverse or mitigate demographic trends. However, grassroots efforts and non-profit organizations offer a promising path forward, proving more adaptable and regionally responsive than government programs. By empowering non-profit organizations with sustained funding and fostering

collaboration with local governments, the national government can magnify the impact of revitalization efforts across Japan. These organizations' region-specific approaches, as seen in Kamiyama and Akita, highlight the importance of solutions that are tailored to the unique strengths of each area.

Equally important is addressing the systemic challenges that deter child-rearing, particularly for women. Policies modeled on France's success in increasing birth rates—such as financial incentives and robust childcare systems—in addition with workplace reforms that encourage childcare leave for men can create an environment conducive to child-rearing and an overall healthier work culture. These measures can be expanded upon by regional initiatives that create attractive regional universities and promote remote work opportunities, which can retain and draw younger generations back to rural communities.

As for the responsibilities of rural regions, it is important to create spaces that will attract and retain younger demographics whether that is with the development of attractive regional universities in cooperation with the national government or incentivizing remote work/ attracting companies popular among young people. Programs such as the Gojome Social Lab, as well, that promote the unique history and tradition of regional areas can also retain or encourage U-turners in the next generation.

In addition to this, it is vital to the revitalization of regional economies that measures are taken to leverage the distinct natural and cultural resources of a given region. Growth industries such as offshore wind power and automobiles in Akita are notable examples of this. Tokushima, also, took advantage of the rich natural environment in their Artist in Residence program and their Work in Residence program to great success.

To make these strategies scalable, rural areas should identify niche industries that align with their unique resources. In the case of Tokushima, the prefectural government was able to establish IT companies as their niche, taking advantage of a robust fiber-optic network and illustrating the potential of digital technology in connecting urban and rural areas. Expanding on these programs and establishing satellite offices could replicate this success on a national scale, yet also transition Japan into an increasingly urbanized country.

Lastly, it is crucial to remember why this issue matters to Japan as a whole. Rural areas embody the cultural and historical richness of Japan, from the expansive rice fields and mountainous temples to its *samurai* villages and traditional craftsmanship. They are a vital part of Japan's global identity and cultural heritage. Revitalizing these regions ensures that Japan remains not only economically resilient, but also culturally valuable and a nation that stays firmly rooted in its history while embracing its future.

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