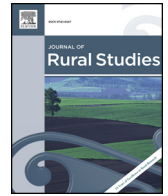


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Inter-community networks of rural leaders and key people: Case study on a rural revitalization program in Kyoto Prefecture, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The ageing and declining populations face not only challenges in maintaining local services and economies, many also have the added physical and logistical burden of being in hilly or mountainous areas in developed nations. There is urgent need for strong rural leaders and key people to take leadership roles and facilitate social networking that bolsters communities. We examined inter-community networks, focusing on a rural region of Kyoto Prefecture, Japan. We identified the leaders and key people in the many rural communities in this region, examined these people's characteristics, and comprehensively surveyed them to uncover views on such networks, what limits them, and how they can be enhanced. Among the results, we found a high sense of need ascribed to these networks, yet effective participation was relatively low. To facilitate interaction, communication by means such as in-person meetings and telephone conversation was foremost, but online means such as e-mail and social networking have also proven to be valuable supplements across the distance. We further plotted these communicational means of key individuals and found networks some to be extensive, while others are still limited to the range of geographically close communities.

1. Introduction

The ageing and declining population of rural communities are global trends, especially in developed nations. Rural inhabitants often suffer from insufficient local services and a high cost of living resulting from geographical remoteness (OECD, 2016; United Nations, 2015). Recent political focus has been on the role of communities in solving local problems in collaboration with external actors. This has been a popular (neo-) endogenous (Bosworth et al., 2016) and nexogenous approach (Bock, 2016) for rural development (see Section 3.1). Ensuring communication to support collaboration in geographically remote areas, however, has been a challenge. Rural community leaders play an important role in regional growth (OECD, 2012) or in rural development approaches (Kováč and Kučerová, 2006). Leaders are usually individuals with power and networks both inside and outside their communities, and another common term used is 'key people'. A relationship between leadership and burnout has been reported (Kanste et al., 2007), so support for rural leaders and key people is needed. Potential external supporters include leaders of other rural communities who face similar problems resulting from geographical disadvantages, ageing, and depopulation. The European Union (EU) LEADER program (Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale or links between actions of rural economic development),

for example, helps to link diverse rural communities and leadership to support exchange of knowledge, information, and experience (European Commission, 2006). In Japan, multi-actor collaboration has been central to rural development policies, to complement a shortage of human resources within communities and promote social innovation (see Section 2). For collaboration between communities, newer communication technologies may be both useful and important (Bock, 2016). Their use among older rural community leaders and key people therefore needs to be examined.

This study focused on the inner workings of an inter-community network of rural leaders and key people in Kyoto Prefecture, Japan, and the viewpoints and demands within the network. Collaboration with various stakeholders in rural areas has been discussed in many previous academic studies (Borg et al., 2015; Marquardt et al., 2012; de Loë et al., 2015; Koontz and Newig, 2014), but there are few empirical studies with a focus on individuals' networks. Analysis of an actual inter-community network and the process or ways of networking can provide practical knowledge to support inter-community collaboration. This requires a focus on leaders and key people, because networking, particularly with external actors, is an important part of their role. We also examined communication methods that facilitate inter-community networking at a distance, and made recommendations for building new rural governance systems using inter-community networks.

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2. Challenges in rural development in Japan

Japan is the fastest-ageing country in the world. In 2005, its population decreased year-on-year for the first time since World War II. During 2006–2007, the population recovered slightly, but since 2008, numbers have continued to fall nationwide (MIC, 2016). In rural areas, population decline and a high proportion of older people have been an issue since the period of high economic growth that started in the 1950s. Since the modern land consolidation policy was institutionalized as the Land Improvement Act of 1949, land improvement projects and advances in agricultural technology have dramatically improved agricultural productivity. Since the 1970s, land improvement projects have been combined with rural improvement projects designed to secure a minimum standard of rural living conditions (Hashimoto and Nishi, 2016). In the late 1980s, the goal of these projects was expanded to involve promotion of rural tourism and improvement of rural amenities (Hashimoto and Nishi, 2016). As a result, living conditions in rural areas have improved to the level of urban areas. Depopulation, however, has continued, and became more serious in the 21st century with the emergence of the concept of *genkai shuraku*, or marginal rural communities with more than a half of the population aged over 65 years (MIC, 2016). This nationwide phenomenon has led to the deterioration of community capability to conserve rural environments and, by extension, to a number of global environmental issues (Takeuchi, 2010; MAFF, 2015). In Japan, about 70% of the land is mountainous, and in 2015, there were 138,256 agricultural communities across both plains areas close to cities, and hilly and mountainous areas. Hilly and mountainous rural communities cover 65% of the land, and most require support from governments and a variety of other external actors. In the 1970s, an endogenous approach was proposed in response to criticisms that an exogenous or top-down approach in regional development lacked focus on the inhabitants. Since then, inhabitants have been encouraged to take administrative roles in development (Ushino, 1982). The national spatial strategy, approved in a Cabinet meeting in 2008, announced new public partnerships of citizens, public and private sector, to support local society. There has been an increasing focus on the role of citizens or communities in regional governance since the start of the 21st century.

In Japan, leaders have been essential to the success of rural development (Shichinohe, 1987). Key people, or volunteers taking on leadership roles, are also important in the context of rural issues (Taguchi and Sone, 2010). Leaders of rural communities have traditionally been older people, usually 60 years old or more, who maintained community initiatives. In most cases, rural leaders in Japan were native male inhabitants of communities, with knowledge of the community history, culture, and industries. However, it has been difficult for rural communities to produce this type of rural leaders with relevant knowledge because of out migration of young people (Shichinohe, 1987) or diversification of lifestyle spending more time outside a community, and the national and local governments have therefore introduced education programs. There are empirically two types of leaders and key people in rural communities in Japan, those appointed officially, and those who emerge for practical reasons. Older men often become official leaders, with leadership rotating every few years. Practical leaders or key people are not always older, and do not have an official position, but are motivated to support rural revitalization. Both types of leader are important, but their presence is often a matter of luck. The shortage of human resources sometimes imposes heavy burdens or responsibilities on a few leaders or key people. Since their capacity is limited, these burdens sometimes lead them to resign their role (Nakatsuka and Uchihira, 2010).

To restructure the traditional governance system in rural communities, the national government in Japan has developed policy programs to facilitate multi-actor cooperation and to encourage external cooperation in rural development. For example, a national policy program for land, water and environment conservation, which ran from 2007 to

2011, supported collaborative organizations bringing together farmers, non-farmers, non-profit organizations and others in neighborhood communities. This type of policy is synchronized with the EU's LEADER program, supporting a bottom-up and network approach in rural development. Another example is the “community-reactivating co-operator squad”, which financially supports external cooperation in rural development activities for 3 years, and helps individuals to continue to be involved in local development as leaders or key people after their term of employment. Information and communication technology (ICT) is expected to facilitate formation of networks. Internet access is widely available, even in mountainous areas in Japan. As of 2015, the national Internet adoption rate was 83.0%, although the adoption rate among those aged 60–69 was only 21.5% (MIC, 2015a). There are still a number of political challenges, including increasing Internet adoption among older people and supporting its effective use in rural development projects. This study provides important insights for those challenges.

3. Literature review

3.1. Contemporary subjects in rural development

Since the LEADER program started in 1991, the endogenous approach has been popular in rural development (Van der Ploeg and van Dijk, 1995; Ray, 1999). Arguments about exogenous vs endogenous approaches resulted in the neo-endogenous approach, where control remains local, but the need to embrace ‘extra-local’ is also recognized (Ray, 2001a,b). This approach concentrates on the concept of ‘networks’ (Lowe et al., 1995; Murdoch, 2000), which is also a key concept of social innovation. Social innovation, however, calls for a nexogenous approach, which underlines the importance of reestablished socio-political connectivity putting more emphasis on ‘extra-local’, because marginal rural communities have fewer of the assets, resources, or capital necessary for social innovation. State withdrawal and the shift from public to private responsibility in the name of social innovation hamper marginal areas (Bock, 2016). These approaches have resulted in the rise of a new social power position, ‘project class’ (Kováč and Kučerová, 2006). The number of case studies on the role of government in (neo-) endogenous or nexogenous approaches in rural development remains limited, however. Several articles reported that governments can control the network of social innovation actors by shaping rural development initiatives and programs, but cannot control other factors influencing successful social innovation (Neumeier, 2017), and the contribution of these factors remains ambiguous (Franklin et al., 2017). Community empowerment is complex and non-engagement of inhabitants should also be considered (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). A suitable method to realize contemporary rural development approaches will require further empirical study.

3.2. Leadership in rural communities

Local or regional leadership is considered to contribute to regional growth (OECD, 2012; McKinsey and Co, 1994). Scholars from around the world have discussed rural problems in the context of leadership development through capacity building (Davies, 2009), leadership and governance of rural communities (Beer, 2014), and the relationship between leadership and location (Collinge et al., 2010). There has been a shift in global policies on rural development from protectionist and interventionist approaches to encouraging ‘self-help’ (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000). A principal means of rural development is now to enhance local leadership to ensure the long-term sustainability of rural communities (Davies, 2007). There are a number of definitions of leadership, both positive and negative (Barker, 1997). Traditionally, leaders have been portrayed as charismatic, skillful and experienced individuals with power to make decisions, mobilize people, and manage money and resources to provide solutions to regional problems (Davies, 2007).

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