

THE 16TH EAST ASIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM

Building Sustainable Local Communities in a Society of Population Decline

New Actors and Diverse Partnerships Opening the Future of Our Regions

ENGLISH SUMMARY EDITION

Nabari and Iga, Mie Prefecture, Japan

November 13–14, 2025

HOST

Japan Association of Charitable Organizations

CO-HOSTING BODIES

China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO)

Korea Forum of Volunteerism (KFV)

The 16th East Asia Civil Society Forum — Proceedings

English Summary Edition

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Original edition

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Photographs and presentation slides are reproduced from the original report. Part 6 (“Cross-Cutting Themes”) has been added by the editors of this English edition and does not form part of the original proceedings.

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About This English Summary Edition

This volume is an abridged English edition of the Japanese-language proceedings of the **16th East Asia Civil Society Forum**, held in Nabari and Iga, Mie Prefecture, Japan, on November 13–14, 2025, under the theme *“Building Sustainable Local Communities in a Society of Population Decline — New Actors and Diverse Partnerships Opening the Future of Our Regions.”* The original runs to 189 pages and reproduces the proceedings almost verbatim, transcribed from the video record together with the written papers and slides submitted by each speaker. This edition condenses that material into a form that can be read in a single sitting outside Japan, Korea, and China.

What has been kept, and what has been condensed

- **All twelve substantive contributions are represented** — four opening addresses, three keynote lectures, six case reports, the panel session, and three closing addresses. Nothing has been dropped.
- **Speeches are summarized rather than translated word for word.** Procedural passages and repetitions have been removed; facts, figures, place names, and dates follow the original, and direct quotation is marked as such.
- **A closing synthesis chapter (Part 6) has been added by the editors** of this English edition. It is not part of the original proceedings.

The Forum at a Glance

Full title	The 16th East Asia Civil Society Forum “Building Sustainable Local Communities in a Society of Population Decline — New Actors and Diverse Partnerships Opening the Future of Our Regions”
Dates	Thursday, November 13 – Friday, November 14, 2025
Venues	Day 1: Nabari Industrial Promotion Center “Aspia”, Nabari City, Mie Prefecture Day 2: Hi-Topia Iga, 5th floor, Iga City, Mie Prefecture
Host	Japan Association of Charitable Organizations (JACO)
Co-hosting bodies	China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO) Korea Forum of Volunteerism (KFV)
Local host committee	Local Executive Committee for the Nabari–Iga Meeting of the 16th East Asia Civil Society Forum
Grant support	The Uehiro Foundation on Ethics and Education Mie Prefecture
Working languages	Japanese, Korean, Chinese (simultaneous interpretation)
Program	4 opening addresses · 3 keynote lectures · 6 national case reports · 1 panel session · 3 closing addresses · field study tour
Next meeting	17th Forum, Republic of Korea, provisionally October 29–31, 2026

Program

Day 1 — Thursday, November 13, 2025

Venue: Nabari Industrial Promotion Center “Aspia”, 822-2 Minami-machi, Nabari City · **Master of ceremonies:** KIKUYAMA Misa (Nabari City)

Time	Item
18:15	Opening ceremony. Performance of <i>Menkake Shinji</i> (a masked Shinto rite) by UENO Tomoyoshi, Noh performer of the Kanze school

Time	Item
18:35	Opening addresses · KITAGAWA Hiroyuki, Mayor of Nabari City · IINO Yuji, Representative, Local Executive Committee for the Iga Region · NAM Youngchan, President, Korea Forum of Volunteerism · WANG Xiangyi, Vice Chair & Secretary General, CANGO (read on his behalf by XU Xiaoxiao)
18:50	Commendations for service to the Forum , followed by a commemorative photograph · Local Executive Committee for the Iga Region, 16th East Asia Civil Society Forum · Bang Jina · Jung-Ae Shin · SY ENC Co., Ltd. · XU Xiaoxiao (CANGO)
19:05	Toast — YAMAOKA Yoshinori, Advisor to the Japanese Executive Committee
19:10	Welcome reception. Demonstration of <i>iai</i> swordsmanship by NAKAMORI Hirofumi, Member of the Mie Prefectural Assembly

Day 2 — Friday, November 14, 2025

Venue: Hi-Topia Iga, 5th floor, 500 Ueno Marunouchi, Iga City · **Master of ceremonies:** KIKUYAMA Misa

Time	Item
09:00	Announcements from the chair
09:05	Keynote 1 — NAWATA Yoshihiko (Professor, Faculty of Law, Hosei University; President, Japan Association for Community Policy): <i>“New Developments in Community in 21st-Century Japan”</i>
09:25	Keynote 2 — CHO In Sook (Senior Research Fellow, Research Institute for Political Studies, Korea University): <i>“Regional Regeneration in an Age of Population Decline — the Potential of Citizen-Led Sustainable Communities”</i>
09:45	Keynote 3 — LI Jing (Professor, School of Government, Yunnan University): <i>“Proactive Responses to Population Aging through Sustainable Regional Development — China’s Policy Practice”</i> (recorded video)
10:05	Commemorative photograph
10:20	Coffee break
10:35	Case report 1 — TABATA Junya (Chair, Nabari District Machizukuri Council): <i>“Community-Building Organizations in Nabari City — with a focus on mutual-aid volunteering”</i>
10:55	Case report 2 — HIRAI Shunkei (President, Iga City Council of Social Welfare): <i>“The Role of Intermediary Support Organizations in Strengthening Local Communities”</i>
11:15	Case report 3 — LEE Jiatac (Chair, Academic Committee, Korean Society for Nonprofit Organization Research): <i>“Building Sustainable Local Communities in a Society of Population Decline — Korean and Japanese cases”</i>
11:35	Case report 4 — CHO Deukhwan (Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Population Center, Gyeongbuk Institute): <i>“Gyeongsangbuk-do’s Principal Measures against Population Decline, and the Challenges Ahead”</i>
11:55	Case report 5 — WANG Yanzhen (Deputy Director and Senior Researcher, Research Center for Social Service Development in the New Era, Beijing Information Science and Technology University): <i>“Community Philanthropy as a Driver of Local Development”</i>
12:05	Case report 6 — JIANG Yinyue (Executive Vice President, Love Eternal Volunteer Association): <i>“Love, Always — responding to aging through community development”</i> (recorded video)
12:35	Panel session. Coordinator: FURUSAWA Koyu (Chair, Japanese Executive Committee; Visiting Professor, Kokugakuin University). Panelists: all six case reporters plus keynote speakers NAWATA Yoshihiko and CHO In Sook
13:20	Closing ceremony and handover to the next host country
13:30	Lunch
14:30	Field study tour — Iga Ueno Castle, the Ninja House, the Ninja Museum, the Haisei-den memorial hall to the poet Bashō, and the Ueno castle town
18:00	SAYONARA party, Sunpia Iga

Part 1 — Opening Addresses

Thursday, November 13, 2025, Nabari Industrial Promotion Center “Aspia”, Nabari City

The Forum opened on the evening of November 13 with a performance of *Menkake Shinji*, a masked Shinto rite, by UENO Tomoyoshi, a Noh performer of the Kanze school — a fitting overture in a city that claims Kan'ami, founder of the Kanze tradition, as its own. Four opening addresses followed, one from each of the bodies that had brought the meeting into being.

1.1 Address by the Mayor of Nabari City

KITAGAWA Hiroyuki · Mayor of Nabari City

Mayor Kitagawa welcomed delegates on behalf of the city and thanked the host, the Japan Association of Charitable Organizations (JACO), and the two co-hosting bodies, the Korea Forum of Volunteerism and the China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO).

He noted that since 2009 the Forum has given the civil societies of Japan, China and Korea a place to join hands, share problems and search together for ways through them. What made the 16th meeting different, he said, was that it was the first to be held in a **regional** part of Japan rather than a metropolitan one — and he argued that this was entirely in keeping with the Forum's spirit of opening the future from the field itself.



Mayor KITAGAWA Hiroyuki delivering the welcome address

The Iga region, he explained, had used the municipal amalgamations of the Heisei era as an occasion to push decentralization *within* the local authority, and had been among the first places in Japan to give the resulting community-building arrangements a footing in municipal ordinance. In Nabari, community-building organizations now pool their strengths across welfare, disaster preparedness, child-rearing and local vitality, working alongside the city administration, NPOs, businesses, schools and universities.

But the city, he acknowledged, now stands at a major turning point. Falling birth rates, an aging population and outright population decline have produced a shortage of people to carry local activity forward, and questions of continuity and succession have become acute. The Forum's theme — building sustainable local communities in a society of population decline — was, in his words, “precisely the most important issue we face.”

What we are aiming at is a community in which anyone can take part, and in which people support one another across generations and across national borders.

— KITAGAWA Hiroyuki, Mayor of Nabari City

Achieving that, he suggested, means drawing on the expertise of young people and of newcomers from outside; making it possible for NPOs, citizens, universities and public bodies to work as genuine partners; and re-knitting the connection between community-building organizations, affiliated groups and the departments of the city administration. He closed by connecting the evening's Noh performance to the Forum's purpose: culture, he said, is a bridge between people and between places, and the same power that Nabari's performing traditions carry ought to be brought to bear on the work of building civil society.

1.2 Address by the Local Executive Committee

IINO Yuji · Representative Director, NPO Akame no Satoyama wo Sodateru Kai; Vice Chair, Executive Committee of the East Asia Civil Society Forum; Representative, Local Executive Committee for the Iga Region

IINO Yuji spoke as the person who had brought the Forum to Nabari — and told the story of how that happened. The 15th Forum had been held in Xi'an, China. He had given the Japanese address there on the day of his seventieth birthday, having traveled some 2,500 kilometers to do so; it was, he said, a meeting he will not forget. At an earlier gathering on Jeju Island — “the Hawaii of Korea” — he had been awarded an International Volunteer Prize. He had reported that award to Mayor Kitagawa in December two years previously, and had said to him, half in earnest:

“Mayor, let’s bring an international conference like this to Nabari.” That conversation was what had now come to fruition.

This was the sixth time the Forum had been held in Japan and the first time outside a major city. Holding an international conference in a regional town, he conceded, is hard work: there are no purpose-built facilities and the labor is considerable. What made it possible was that local people had answered *“let’s do it”* with one voice — the distillation of a year and a half of effort by people determined to run community-building themselves. His reason for insisting on a regional venue was strategic as much as sentimental: he wanted the Forum to interest ordinary townspeople and to widen its base.



IINO Yuji, Vice Chair of the Executive

If we don't do that, then even a gathering that has run for sixteen years will see its energy taper off, and I was seriously worried that the grassroots work in Japan, China and Korea might simply fade away.

— IINO Yuji

The organizing theme for hosting the delegates was *omotenashi* — understood here in its tea-ceremony sense of *ichigo ichie*, “this moment will never come again”: doing one’s utmost for a single encounter, valuing feeling above form, and giving without expecting anything back. As for the subject matter, the committee chose population decline because it is the problem most acutely felt by people who actually live in regional Japan. Both Nabari and Iga are being reshaped by it. One response has been to insist that community-building be done *by residents themselves* — an approach for which the Iga region is regarded nationally as a front-runner.

His closing hope was that the Iga meeting would prompt people running non-profit work in provincial towns across Japan, China and Korea to take an interest in the Forum, and to start saying: *“we want it held where we live.”*

1.3 Address from the Republic of Korea

NAM Youngchan · President, Korea Forum of Volunteerism

NAM Youngchan opened by recalling the successful 15th Forum in Xi’an a year earlier, and thanked YAMAOKA Yoshinori and the staff of JACO, together with WANG Xiangyi and colleagues at CANGO. Turning to the theme, he drew attention to the subtitle — “new actors and diverse partnerships” — and argued that it identifies the crux of the matter. Responding adequately to population decline cannot be done by government, private bodies, civil society or individual activists each working alone; pooling one another’s resources and experience, and constructing both new actors and the machinery for collaboration between them, is indispensable.



NAM Youngchan, President of the Korea Forum of Volunteerism

He was direct about why Japan is a useful host:

Of the three countries, Japan has experienced the shrinkage of localities and the risk of their disappearance earliest, and has pioneered the countermeasures. As the host country, I very much look forward to Japan offering us a great deal of insight and practical example.

— NAM Youngchan

His central analytical point was that the crisis facing our regions is not simply that there are fewer people. The economic, social and cultural foundations of a locality give way; community is lost from the roots up. It is, he said, a **crisis of social structure**. Meeting it effectively requires local bodies, non-profits and civil society organizations to link up organically and — under genuine partnership — to design and drive projects and programs that reflect the actual conditions and needs of the place. That, in turn, demands strategies and approaches that go beyond the existing frameworks.

He expressed particular hope that the Forum would go deeply into the question of how to build sustainable models

grounded in the volunteer ethic, and stressed that while the support of national and local government matters, what is decisive is drawing out the spontaneous participation of civil society organizations and residents themselves, so that each place can develop a model suited to its own character and needs.

He closed by paying tribute to the passion and dedication of those present, and by looking forward to welcoming everyone to Korea the following year.

1.4 Address from the People's Republic of China

WANG Xiangyi · Vice Chair and Secretary General, China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO) — *read on his behalf by XU Xiaoxiao*

The Chinese address was delivered by XU Xiaoxiao, Deputy Secretary General of CANGO, on behalf of WANG Xiangyi. CANGO is one of the organizations that founded the Forum.

The address noted that over its fifteen years the Forum had set out from Tokyo, traveled through cities of China, Japan and Korea, and had now returned to Japan to meet for the first time in a provincial city — stepping, as the text put it, into fields and forested hills. All three countries, it observed, have entered a phase of zero or negative population growth; the hollowing-out of villages, aging, and the contraction of industry and public services are shared problems. But every crisis contains a turning point, and the key to sustainable community lies in the **return of people** and the **concentration of capacity**.



XU Xiaoxiao reading the address of WANG Xiangyi on his behalf

It then set out, briefly, what each country is doing:

Country	Measures cited
Japan	The Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad (<i>chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai</i>), which encourages young urban people to relocate to rural areas; the promotion of the “small-scale multifunctional autonomy” model, which integrates resources for finely-tuned support of older residents; and the spread of Silver Human Resource Centers, which keep active older people involved in local activity.
Republic of Korea	Local governments expanding employment for older people; Seoul's establishment of Senior Employment Support Centers and Senior Talent Banks, providing job development and employment counseling.
China	U-turn entrepreneurship by young people, built around distinctive guesthouses and ecological agriculture; new models of elderly care in urban and rural communities including mutual-aid care and time banking; the spread of elderly canteens and day-service centers in cities; and the promotion of <i>xingfuyuan</i> (“happiness homes”) in the countryside, weaving a tighter support network across the urban–rural divide.

The address closed on a proverb and a proposition:

Mountains never meet, but people always do. It is not the change in population structure that is the real challenge; the obstacle to development is remaining shut inside our own isolated thinking. If we open our hearts and combine the innovative force of the cities, the ecological wisdom of the countryside, the warm networks of citizens and the transformative power of technology, we can convert the pressure of population decline into a driving force for a new kind of development.

— WANG Xiangyi, CANGO (read by XU Xiaoxiao)

Also on the evening of Day 1

Commendations for service to the Forum were presented to the Local Executive Committee for the Iga Region; Bang Jina; Jung-Ae Shin; SY ENC Co., Ltd.; and XU Xiaoxiao of CANGO.

The toast was proposed by YAMAOKA Yoshinori, Advisor to the Japanese Executive Committee.

At the welcome reception, NAKAMORI Hirofumi, Member of the Mie Prefectural Assembly, gave a demonstration of *iai* swordsmanship.

Part 2 — Keynote Addresses

Friday, November 14, 2025, Hi-Topia Iga, Iga City

Three keynote lectures opened the main conference: one from each country. Taken together they set up the intellectual frame for everything that followed — a Japanese account of how community policy has been institutionalized and where it is now straining; a Korean account that questions the rhetoric of “local extinction” and looks to France for an alternative model of civic regeneration; and a Chinese account of aging at a scale and speed without precedent, and of the policy architecture being built around the community to meet it.

2.1 New Developments in Community in 21st-Century Japan

NAWATA Yoshihiko · Professor, Faculty of Law, Hosei University; President, Japan Association for Community Policy

Professor Nawata has worked on community policy for some forty years, and has chaired the Japan Association for Community Policy for over a decade; his comparative fieldwork has been carried out mainly in Germany. He used the two host cities — Iga and Nabari — as the entry point for an account of where Japanese local community now stands.

From municipal amalgamation to “decentralization within the municipality”

Since the Meiji period there have been several great waves of municipal amalgamation. The most recent, the **Great Heisei Amalgamation**, was carried out intensively between roughly 2001 and 2005, driven by national fiscal reform and supported by special merger legislation; the ambition, as Professor Nawata's slides recorded, was to reduce some 3,200 municipalities to about 1,000. Each such merger creates a problem: an area that had been a municipality in its own right becomes merely “one district” of a larger city, and an institutional vacuum opens where local self-government used to be. In Japan that vacuum has historically been filled by *jichikai* and *chōnaikai* — neighborhood associations, a distinctively Japanese form of voluntary territorial organization.

During the Heisei amalgamations, many municipalities decided not to leave the old municipal areas as institutional blanks. Instead they created new arrangements known as **decentralization within the city** (*toshinai bunken*) or **decentralization within the locality** (*chiiki-nai bunken*), which give local communities a defined set of powers and responsibilities on a statutory footing. Mie Prefecture was no exception, and both Iga City and Nabari City designed their own versions and gave them force through municipal ordinance.

In the Iga area the discussion began early: from around 1998, ahead of the national wave, seven municipalities had started to explore creating a single city out of a shared sphere of daily life. In 2002 the merger council set up a **Decentralization and Self-Government Sub-Committee**, staffed largely by publicly recruited citizens, whose agenda anticipated by more than twenty years most of what the Forum was discussing in 2025:

- designing arrangements for community self-government fit for an age of decentralization — hence the creation of *chiiki-nai bunken*;
- forming localities capable of standing on their own and remaining sustainable twenty years later, under conditions of extreme aging and population decline;
- responding to the declining capacity of territorial organizations (neighborhood associations, districts) and the emergence of new kinds of actor such as NPOs — hence the emphasis on securing new bearers of activity, on community business, and on cooperation among diverse actors;
- recognizing the limits of what the administration itself can do, particularly in major disasters.

After Iga City came into being, these arrangements were made permanent through a **Basic Ordinance on Self-Government** (*jichi kihan jōrei*).



NAWATA YOSHIHIKO delivering the first keynote address

How the two cities are organized

Iga City builds on territorial bodies such as neighborhood associations, but adds to them a body called a **Residents' Self-Government Council** (*jūmin jichi kyōgikai*), established at the scale of the elementary school district, in which NPOs, volunteer groups, welfare organizations and any other body doing public-benefit work in the area can take part. Each council debates local problems democratically, draws up its own **community-building plan**, and then carries out projects on the basis of that plan.

Nabari City divides its territory into fifteen areas, each with a **community-building organization** constituted under municipal ordinance. As in Iga, each area produces its own plan and pursues resident-led activity.

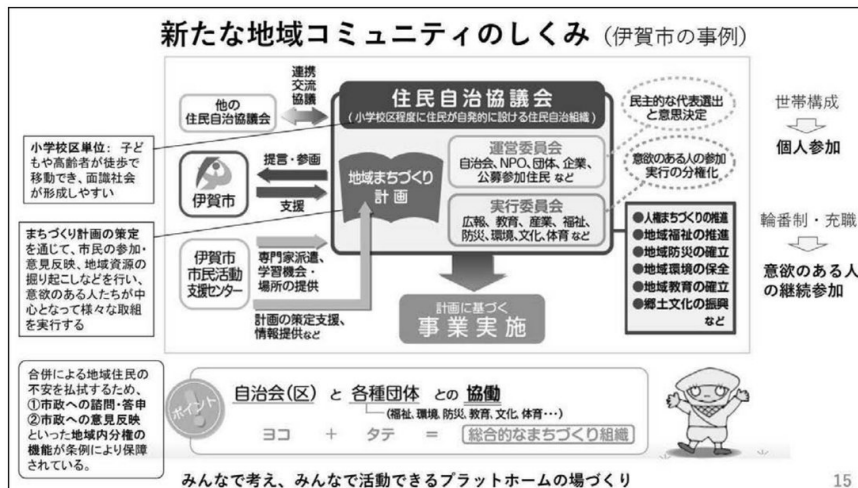


Figure 2.1 The architecture of the new local community system, using Iga City as the example. The Residents' Self-Government Council (center) draws up a community-building plan and implements projects under it; the city administration and the Citizens' Activity Support Center (left) supply advice, venues and planning support. The strapline: "Creating a platform where everyone can think and everyone can act."

One instrument deserves particular attention. Under Iga City's *toshinai bunken* system, each Residents' Self-Government Council receives a **block grant** (*ikkatsu kōfukin*) — a single, non-earmarked sum from which the locality chooses its own priorities. Block-granting of this kind exists in some European cities, including in Germany; what Professor Nawata considers distinctive in Japan is the high proportion of the work the local organization then **carries out itself**. Where depopulation and aging are most severe, a further step has been taken: localities are encouraged to **earn part of the money themselves** through community business — local product development, experience-based tourism, shopping-support services.

A national policy tide, not a local curiosity

Professor Nawata was emphatic that none of this is peculiar to Mie. Since the 1990s, as the decentralization debate advanced, the question shifted from *dantai jichi* — the autonomy of the local authority as an institution — to *jūmin jichi*, the self-government of residents themselves. The 27th Local Government System Research Council's report (2004) argued that as basic municipalities grow larger, ways must be opened for them to establish local self-government bodies. The Local Autonomy Act was amended in 2004 to create the **Local Self-Government District system** (*chiiki jichiku seido*).

That statutory route has been little used — only 17 municipalities nationwide as of 2017 — because the law requires that, if introduced at all, self-government districts must cover the *whole* municipality. Iga City concluded that the design of such bodies should be decided principally by residents, and enacted its own more flexible ordinance instead, embedding the arrangements inside its Basic Ordinance on Self-Government.

More recently the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has adopted the concept of the **Region Management Organization (RMO)**. The Ministry's survey report of March 2025 found that, as of financial year 2024, **8,193 RMOs had been formed across 893 municipalities — over half of all municipalities in Japan**. The Ministry defines an RMO as an organization in which the residents of an area take the lead, in which a range of related actors participate, and which sustainably implements measures to resolve local problems according to a management policy the body has itself adopted.

What do these organizations actually do? The national survey gives the following picture:

Field of activity	Share of RMOs active	Typical content
Resident exchange	85.4%	Festivals, culture, sport and athletics meetings, friendship events, newsletters, multicultural coexistence
Disaster prevention, crime prevention, traffic safety	67.0%	Drills and training, welfare checks, patrols, security lighting, watching over children on the way to and from school
Lifelong learning and health promotion	65.8%	Courses and workshops at community halls, health promotion, care prevention, transmission of local heritage
Local environment	61.7%	Beautification and clean-ups, grass cutting, flower beds, planting
Support for older residents' daily life	60.1%	Communal meals and respect-for-the-aged events, mobility support including community buses, shopping support, jointly run shops
Support for children and child-rearing	56.3%	Healthy development of young people, meeting places for the child-rearing generation, learning support, after-school clubs, children's canteens
Revitalizing local industry	20.6%	Processing and sale of local specialties, farm shops, experience tourism

Source: NAWATA Yoshihiko, keynote slides, drawing on the national survey of Region Management Organizations.

Cooperation between municipalities has developed alongside. Nabari City, Iga City, Unnan City in Shimane Prefecture (which holds the secretariat) and Asago City in Hyōgo Prefecture were among the founders of the **Small-Scale Multifunctional Autonomy Promotion Network Conference**, established in 2015 to examine questions such as legal personality for these bodies and to provide a place for exchange. Its membership now stands at 362 — 280 municipalities, 56 organizations and 26 individuals — and around 280 municipalities take part in sharing experience and problems.

Expectations of local community have risen sharply across the whole of central government, not only in the local-government ministry:

- **Internal Affairs and Communications** conducts continuing surveys and study groups on RMOs and has produced training materials for municipalities and residents.
- **Cabinet Office** links community regeneration to regional revitalization policy through “small hubs” (*chiisana kyoten*) and support for developing RMOs.
- **Health, Labor and Welfare**, since the 2000 revision of the Social Welfare Act, has obliged prefectures and municipalities to draw up **community welfare plans**, and is now building the Community-Based Integrated Care System and “multi-layered support systems”, deploying Daily-Life Support Coordinators and Community Welfare Coordinators in each daily-living area — whose role is not only individual casework but raising the relational capacity of the community as a whole.
- **Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries** is investing in RMO formation that plays to rural strengths.
- **Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology** promotes the **Community School** concept, establishing school management councils with resident participation at every primary and lower-secondary school and deploying coordinators for “community–school collaborative activities”, making the school a nucleus of community-building. In lifelong learning, social education and public hall activity, the emphasis is on circulating what people learn back into public-benefit activity in their own area. In sport, the transfer of school club activities to the community and the development of comprehensive community sports clubs aim to combine health promotion with community formation.
- **Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism**, through the National Spatial Strategy and the Act on Revitalization of City Centers, has set out clear expectations of civil society organizations and local communities via area management and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

The pinch: who is left to do the work

Against this rising tide of expectation, Professor Nawata set the harder reality. Territorial voluntary bodies — neighborhood associations and the like — have been weakening gradually since around the 1980s. Fewer people are willing to serve as officers, and activity tends to contract.

The Japan Association for Community Policy held its 2023 conference in Nabari City, using the city's own community policy as material. Professor Nawata summarized its five parallel sessions:

1. **Designing new community arrangements.** Where residents do not understand the purpose of the system, activity becomes ritualized and the gap between areas widens — especially when officers rotate and the founding intent is not passed on. Municipal officers assigned to districts help, but frequent transfers make continuity difficult; hence the growing weight of **intermediary support organizations**. The public-interest foundation running Kusatsu City's community projects in Shiga Prefecture was cited as an example, providing both back-up support (accounting, tax, labor, public relations, training) and producer-type support (plan-making, human-resource development, network coordination) — the latter has drawn young people into proposing new activities.
2. **Securing new people to do the work.** Rather than lamenting the shortage, the priority is to help each person now living in the area take an interest and share ownership of a vision. Latent capacity always exists; what is needed is an occasion to start and coaching thereafter, and plan-making is one such occasion. The Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad can also activate existing residents: in Asago City, Hyōgo, **17 squad members were deployed across 11 self-government councils and 16 subsequently settled in the area.**
3. **Multicultural coexistence.** Foreign residents are increasing, especially in regional cities; the 2018 immigration-law revision spread reception measures nationwide, but arrangements for coexistence as *residents* remain incomplete. In Iga City, foreign nationals exceed **7% of the total population and around 20% of people in their twenties.** The city issues multilingual information and runs a multicultural coexistence center, and the NPO **Iga no Densetsu**, founded in 1999, provides specialist intermediary support — yet problems remain around households in economic difficulty and disaster preparedness. The open question is whether foreign residents will become members and bearers of the community.
4. **The effect of population decline on daily life.** Support for older people is increasingly organized as mutual aid among residents, and localities where buses and taxis have thinned out are running their own transport. Making such work continuous requires the discipline of community business. Iga City Council of Social Welfare uses fundraising technique to secure users and supporters alongside the money — children's canteens supporting single-parent families, places combining care prevention with a salon, shopping buses.
5. **Cooperation among diverse actors.** New community-building needs not only territorial bodies but NPOs with specialist skills, volunteer groups and businesses; in practice these efforts often stop inside the federation of neighborhood associations, so coordination is itself a role. In Matsusaka City, Mie Prefecture, the administration has created a grant system supporting work by multiple actors together, and an NPO-run Citizens' Activity Support Center coordinates links between community organizations, businesses and NPOs.

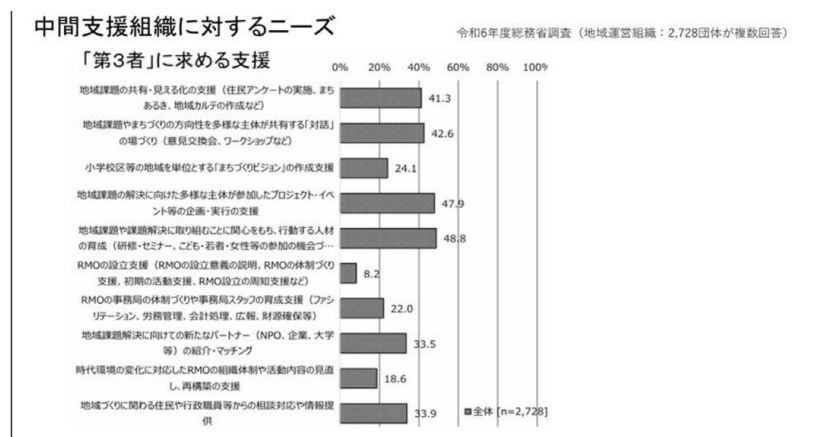


Figure 2.2 What community organizations want from a “third party”. National survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, FY2024; 2,728 Region Management Organizations, multiple responses, percent. Top of the list: developing people who take an interest and act 48.8 · planning and delivering multi-actor projects 47.9 · creating spaces for dialogue 42.6 · making local problems visible 41.3. Lowest: support in establishing an RMO, 8.2.

The structural change nobody planned for

Professor Nawata is currently conducting commissioned research on local community for Machida City in Tokyo, using survey and interview methods. What has emerged, he said, is **a large change in the social stratum that has sustained local activity**.

Japanese community activity has historically been carried by what he called “24-hour citizens” — people who are physically present in the neighborhood during the day and can act as volunteers. Concretely: the self-employed, full-time homemakers, and retired older people.

Comparing a 2006 survey with recent data, all three of these strata have fallen sharply. Despite the advance of aging, the number of people answering “not employed” has actually **declined**. Full-time homemakers have fallen substantially. Global competition has reduced the number of self-employed. In other words, the human base for the traditional model of community activity is contracting structurally — and it is plain that the activity cannot be sustained on the old assumptions.

His prescription therefore had four parts:

1. **Look again, carefully, at what the locality's problems actually are**, and rebuild the content of activity so that it matches the needs of a diverse population of residents.
2. **Draw actively on the expertise of the administration, of specialist agencies and of intermediary support organizations**.
3. **Strengthen the secretariat function of community organizations** and put their operating base on a stable footing.
4. **Where necessary, pay for people** — introduce mechanisms for securing staff on a remunerated basis, and use community business and fundraising.

He returned in his conclusion to the international frame. In Germany, where the “high welfare, high burden” model commands broad national consent, cooperation with civil society organizations is — in his impression — less far advanced than in Japan. Many East Asian countries operate what he called a “**medium welfare, medium burden**” system, and expectations of civil society are correspondingly stronger. Meanwhile the idea of *kyōdō* — collaboration between administration and citizens, strongly emphasized in Japan since the 1990s — is close to the concept of **co-production** proposed by Vincent Ostrom and others, and has become an important policy element in many countries.

He also noted the family resemblances across the region: Korea has arrangements very similar in name and structure to Japan's residents' self-government councils, while China's residents' committees and villagers' committees, although different in character, share the feature of dividing the interior of a municipality into resident organizations by area.

Japan's local communities are being shaken by great structural change, and yet they go on tenaciously with the activity that supports daily life in the locality. The cases from Iga and Nabari, and from across Japan, offer a good many hints for thinking about the problems and possibilities common to civil society in East Asia.

— NAWATA Yoshihiko

He closed by noting that the Association's 2026 conference would be held in Machida City, where he intends to take the same questions further through joint research with the city.

2.2 Regional Regeneration in an Age of Population Decline

The potential of citizen-led sustainable communities

CHO In Sook · Senior Research Fellow, Research Institute for Political Studies, Korea University

Dr. Cho began — in Japanese — by explaining her fondness for the ninja and for the poet Bashō, and her consequent affection for the name Nabari long before she ever came there. She then continued in Korean. Her lecture drew on her book *Local Extinction: Traveling the World*, and on long research in France.

The world is still growing; East Asia is not

Globally the *total* volume of population is still rising. More than half of world population growth to 2050 is projected to be concentrated in just eight countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and Tanzania. The world average total fertility rate stood at 2.2 in 2024.

Set against that, Korea, Taiwan and Japan have turned to outright decline with extremely low fertility. Parts of Europe hold their total population roughly steady through immigration; Korea, Japan and Taiwan are reluctant to receive immigrants, and therefore feel the full force of natural decrease. That, Dr. Cho suggested, is what distinguishes East Asia in a global frame.



CHO In Sook delivering the second keynote address

Korea's position

Drawing on official data from Statistics Korea (KOSTAT), she set out the following:

- Korea's population entered decline in **2021** and has recorded consecutive years of decrease. In 2021 alone it fell by **0.37 percent** — roughly **nine times** the rate of decline of the previous year (0.04 percent).
- UN world population projections and World Bank material include estimates that by **2100** Korea's population could fall by more than half, to around **24 million**.
- As of 2022 the older population stood at about **9 million**; the working-age population is projected to fall by roughly **half by 2070**.
- The total fertility rate has been below 1 since **2018**. In 2021 it stood at **0.81**, against 0.84 the year before — the lowest since the statistical series began in 1970. Korea's TFR was around **0.75 in 2024**.
- Korea is currently the **only OECD member** with fewer than one birth per woman; the OECD average was 1.59 in 2020.
- Japan has faced decline since the early 2000s; its TFR is around **1.15–1.2**. Both countries are in the lowest group in the world.

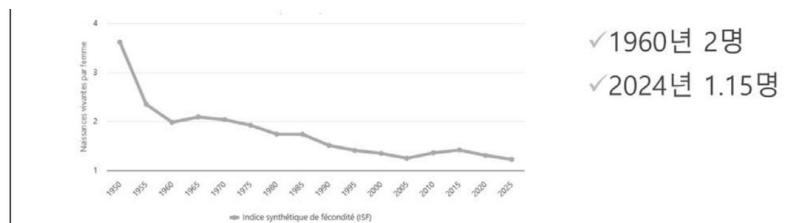


Figure 2.3 Japan's total fertility rate, 1950–2025 (live births per woman): 2.0 in 1960, 1.15 in 2024.

Why fertility falls, and what policy can and cannot do

France is habitually cited as a relative success in pro-natal policy, and Dr. Cho — who studied there — recalled the annual news item announcing that France had again topped the European fertility table, and the national pride in being “a society where you can have and raise children.” Yet French fertility too has been drifting down. Stopping the fall completely, she argued, is not easy for any country.

Three causes are common to the developed world:

1. More people are **delaying marriage and childbirth, or not choosing them at all**.
2. **Economic insecurity is large** — housing prices, the cost of education.
3. **Values have changed**: marrying and having children is no longer self-evidently “the normal course of a life.”

Sociology calls people who prioritize self-realization and authenticity over material affluence **post-materialists**, and young people holding such values are increasing worldwide. In the terms of Maslow's hierarchy, more people now place self-actualization above safety and stability.

Ireland makes the point sharply. Even in a country with a strong Catholic tradition, where marrying and forming a family was long taken for granted, economic growth and urbanization have made fertility hard to sustain. A cyclical

upturn may lift the rate briefly, but the earlier level is not recovered over the long run.

My conclusion is that although policy can raise the birth rate to some degree, there are limits to restoring it completely to its former level.

— CHO In Sook

Does population decline mean the extinction of localities?

In 2014 the phrase *chihō shōmetsu* — “local extinction” — spread rapidly in Japan. Researchers at Korean population institutes introduced the concept, and a stream of seminars and reports followed in many Korean local authorities, fanning the sense that “at this rate we will disappear.”

Dr. Cho does not make light of the effects of decline. But the equation *fewer people = the locality vanishes entirely* is, she argued, too simple. Japanese survey data bear this out: of the settlements identified in a 2010 survey as possibly becoming uninhabited within ten years, **fewer than one in ten actually became uninhabited within a defined subsequent period** — her slides put the figure at 41 of 452 settlements, or 9.1 percent, over five years. In Korea too, mountain villages often feel as though they are about to empty, but cases of complete disappearance are in fact rare.

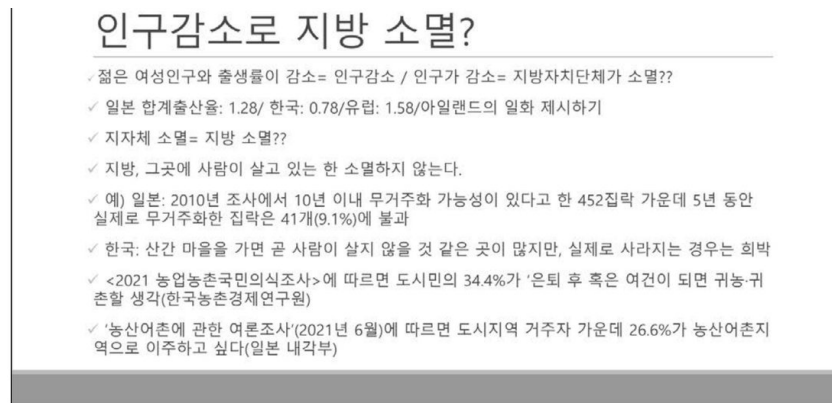


Figure 2.4 “Does population decline mean local extinction?” The slide sets out the assumed chain — fewer young women → fewer births → fewer people → the local authority disappears — and tests it. Its conclusion: a locality does not disappear as long as people are living there. Below, the Japanese settlement data and two migration-intention surveys (Korea Rural Economic Institute 2021, 34.4%; Japanese Cabinet Office June 2021, 26.6%).

What is routinely overlooked, she continued, is that **a substantial minority of city dwellers want to move to the countryside**. In Korean opinion polling roughly one third of urban residents say they would move to a farming, mountain or fishing village if the conditions were right; Japanese surveys put the equivalent figure at around one quarter. Population decline does not therefore translate directly into the complete disappearance of the regions. The question is how to receive the flows between city and country, and the changes in how people want to live, in a constructive way — and that is where the intelligence of policy and of civil society is being tested.

The real problem: capital-region concentration

Reframing the question, Dr. Cho argued that what Korea and Japan actually share is **a severe imbalance between metropolitan and rural populations**.

Country / region	Share of national population in the capital region
Republic of Korea (Seoul, Gyeonggi, Incheon)	about 50%
Japan (Greater Tokyo)	about 30%
Taiwan (Taipei and surrounds)	about 30%
France (Île-de-France / Paris region)	about 16%

Worldwide, urban population has overtaken rural population, but the balance has not collapsed to anything like the same degree. Japan taken alone shows a very large urban–rural gap, and Korea and Taiwan are close behind. Correcting this **excessive concentration in the capital region**, and making a society in which it is possible to go on living in the regions, is the great shared task.

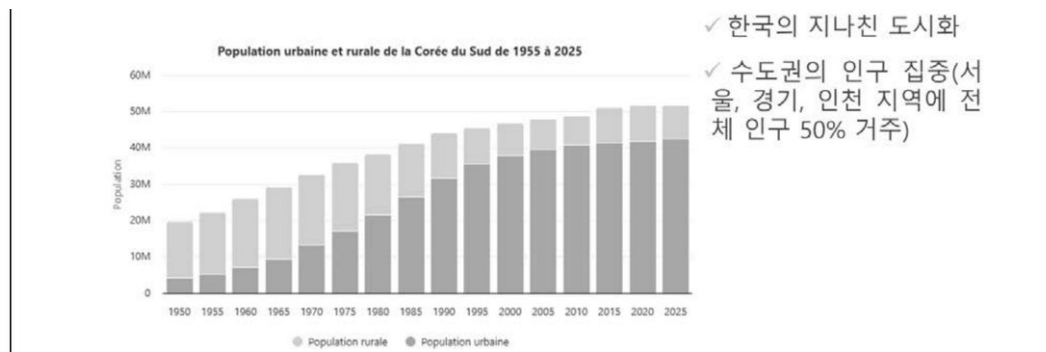


Figure 2.5 Korea's urban and rural population, 1955–2025 (millions; darker segment urban). The slide's notes: "Korea's excessive urbanization"; "50% of the total population lives in Seoul, Gyeonggi and Incheon."

In her written paper Dr. Cho set the historical mechanism out more fully. Over the past half-century Korea's total population grew by a factor of 2.5, but its **urban population grew more than twentyfold**. Finance, education, business, medicine and shopping all concentrated in Seoul; Japan and Taiwan show the same pattern. Agricultural mechanization pushed farm labor to the cities, and better transport made leaving easy. Large-scale investment in roads, railways, hospitals and schools went to areas of high population density, reinforcing concentration: cities captured the services and the opportunities, and rural areas were left until later.

She also gave the European fertility context: in Western Europe the average number of children per woman fell from **2.8 in 1960**, dropped below the natural-replacement threshold of **2.1 in 1975**, and had fallen further to **1.53 by 2019**.

Two French movements

Where, then, should effort go? In Korea the phrase "local extinction" took on a life of its own, and policies followed that scattered large budgets over short periods. What Dr. Cho concluded from studying France and other European cases is that **concentrating money is not by itself the answer**. European debate focuses less on population decline as such than on *how local societies and communities are changing*, and on *what effects those changes have on society and culture* — and from there works out long-term strategy on how to raise the quality of local life and how to construct participatory governance.

Colibris — "do your part"

The **Colibris** (hummingbird) movement was founded in 2007 by Pierre Rabhi, an environmental activist and farmer, together with the film director Cyril Dion. Its slogan is *Fais ta part* — "play your own part."

The name comes from an indigenous American legend. When a great forest fire broke out, almost all the animals simply fled; only the hummingbird carried water, one drop at a time in its small beak, and let it fall into the flames. The other animals laughed and asked what was the point of doing such a thing. The hummingbird replied: *"I know. But I am doing what I can do."*

On the strength of that message — that small actions, accumulated by many, can change a society — Colibris has spread citizen projects across France: community gardens, organic restaurants, local currencies, alternative schools. There are today around **200 local groups** in the French-speaking world, and the movement acts as a link between individual citizens' learning and their action. Its founders' documentary film *Demain* (Tomorrow) introduced initiatives in ten countries addressing 21st-century environmental and social problems across agriculture, energy, economy, education and governance, and drew a large response. The movement makes particular use of techniques of civic education and civic action, including large-scale open online courses run with well-known universities, and runs a **Colibris Summer School** at which specialists and citizens debate and practice the "hummingbird plan."

Bouge ton coq — "get your rooster moving"

Bouge ton coq was begun in 2020 by three residents in the Auvergne, under the message *act now, from today*. Its purpose is to regenerate small villages that are losing their shops and services to population decline. By 2024 it had spread to around **200 villages across France**.

Its philosophy is blunt: *if the foundation collapses, everything collapses*. The village is the basic unit of society, and life can only be breathed back into it when citizens, community leaders, elected officials and business leaders combine their strength. Concretely, the movement:

- helps villages that have lost their shop to open a **participatory grocery** — a non-profit enterprise run directly by citizens, in which each member gives **two hours a month** behind the counter. Because there are no staff costs, prices need not rise and residents can buy food affordably;
- works with **Médecins Solidaires**, a national network of doctors, to establish **rural medical centers** in “medical deserts”. Young clinicians, retired doctors and experienced doctors who want a change of setting each give **one week a year** to seeing patients — which has become a substantial alternative for areas with no local doctor.

What the two movements have in common, Dr. Cho stressed, is that **central government is not pushing policy down from above**. Local citizens, local authorities, businesses and professionals each bring their own role, and the concrete solution is made by their own hands.

Conclusion

Stopping population decline outright is probably beyond any country. But building a **local community in which people can live in a way that is fully human** is, Dr. Cho argued, entirely possible even in a society whose population is falling. That requires:

1. **continuing policy from central and local government** to hold the birth rate up even a little;
2. **arrangements for “social increase”** — population gained through people moving in: teleworking, regional hubs, migration policy;
3. and above all, **each individual citizen living in the area finding the role they can play, and acting on it**.

A sustainable community cannot be made by government alone. It is only when civil society, local authorities and businesses each accumulate actions like the hummingbird's single drop of water that a realistic and hopeful future comes into view.

— CHO In Sook

Her written paper adds a warning and a caveat: rural revitalization fails when government simply scatters funds on a short-term view; it can never be solved by the logic of central government and capital alone; it has to be worked at over the long term within a larger frame.

2.3 Proactive Responses to Population Aging through Sustainable Regional Development

China's policy practice

LI Jing · Professor, School of Government, Yunnan University (*presented by recorded video*)

Professor Li was unable to travel and presented by video. Her lecture had three parts: the character of population aging in China; how the Chinese government is constructing policy around the sustainable development of communities; and concrete examples from the field.

Five features of aging in China

Chinese aging, she argued, can be characterized as “*aging beyond the ordinary rules*”, with five features.

Feature	What it means	Evidence given
“ Super ” aging — sheer scale	Not merely an “aging society” but one of a size for which that phrase is inadequate	As of 2024, people aged 60 and over number about 310 million, some 22% of the population ; those aged 65 and over about 220 million, over 15% . China has the largest older population of any country in the world.
“ Ultra-fast ” aging — speed	The pace keeps accelerating	The share of people aged 65+ reached 7% around the year 2000 and 14% little more than twenty years later — the slide gives 21 years for the 7%→14% transition. What European countries took several decades to experience, China has undergone at a stroke.
“ Premature ” aging — growing	Aging arrived in the middle of development, not after it	When full-scale aging began around 2000, GDP per head was only about US\$959 — just under \$1,000. Unlike Western Europe and North

Feature	What it means	Evidence given
old before growing rich		America, China did not become sufficiently wealthy first.
“Complex” aging — interwoven with other transitions	Rapid urbanization, digitalization and large-scale migration are happening at the same time	The seventh census recorded about 492 million people whose registered hukou location differs from where they actually live , of whom the floating population is 376 million and inter-provincial movers 125 million . Rural vs urban aging rates were 10.9% : 9.7% in 2000 but 23.8% : 15.8% in 2020 — the countryside is now aging markedly faster than the cities. Average household size has fallen to about 2.62 persons (2020) ; the three-generation household and even the couple-with-children household are giving way to childless couples, single-person households and older people living alone.
“Extremely difficult” aging	Aging and low fertility compound one another	The total fertility rate, once around 6, is now a little above 1, and the population has recorded natural decrease for three consecutive years .

There is also a **digital divide**: many older people are not accustomed to smartphones or cashless payment, and as medical and public services move online they suffer a new form of disadvantage. Professor Li was careful to set the bright side alongside — under the socialist system, medical and public-health standards have risen greatly and **life expectancy reached 79 nationally in 2020, exceeding 80 in some areas**. “We have become a society where people can live long lives” is, she said, a genuine achievement.

Life expectancy has risen almost continuously since the 1950s while fertility, after peaking in the **great baby boom of 1963**, has fallen in a long descent. The cohort born around 1963 is now crossing the threshold of 60, and the older population is expected to grow abruptly **from the 2020s into around 2030** — a period consciously understood in China as **“the decisive decade”** for putting aging policy in place.



Professor Li Jing delivering the third keynote
by recorded video

The policy architecture

In China, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the State Council issue a policy document jointly, it counts as a decision of the highest order. On aging, several such documents have appeared in quick succession:

Date	Document
November 18, 2021	Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Strengthening Work on Aging in the New Era — which set out clearly the basic framework of elderly care as “home-based at the foundation, supported by the community, with institutions as the complement.”
January 15, 2024	Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Developing the Silver Economy and Improving the Welfare of Older People
December 30, 2024	Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Deepening the Reform and Development of Elderly Care Services — which develops the same thinking further and proposes building a three-tier care network : at county/city level, at subdistrict and township level, and at village and community level

The themes emphasized in common across these documents are: community-based home care and diversified elderly-care services; the model combining “community + property management + elderly services”; the development of **15-minute living circles** in cities; the promotion of **embedded** community elderly care; the construction of **“complete communities”** (*wanzheng shequ*); and the implementation of mutual-aid elderly care in rural areas.

Embedded services and the fifteen-minute city

The most distinctive idea, Professor Li suggested, is **“embedded services”** (*qianru xing*). Rather than building large new facilities on the edge of town, small-scale care, child-rearing and meal-support functions are inserted into

existing housing estates: nurseries, elderly service stations and simple health-consultation desks built *inside* the community, so that older people and children alike reach what they need **within a fifteen-minute walk**.

That phrase has become one of the keywords of Chinese urban policy, expressed as the **15-minute living circle** (*shiwu fenzhong shenghuoquan*): cities reorganized so that shopping, medical care, meals, elderly services and child-rearing are all available within that radius — an attempt to answer aging and low fertility simultaneously. A **Three-Year Action Plan for Developing Urban 15-Minute Living Circles** was issued in 2023, and the training and deployment of specialist staff to support older people inside the community sits within the same framework.

What has changed in the policy

Professor Li identified six directions of change:

1. The **level at which documents are issued** has risen year by year, indicating the high attention of Party and government.
2. **The number of participating actors has increased**, and it has become explicit that this is a whole-of-society task.
3. **The scope has widened and the underlying values have shifted**. Where welfare policy once focused on “older people in economic difficulty”, it now addresses *all* older people and, increasingly, *all citizens*.
4. **Service content has become comprehensive** and the principle of *renben* — putting people at the center — has been strengthened: not just meals and a minimum living guarantee, but medical care, nursing, psychological care, cultural activity, sport and rights protection.
5. **The importance of technological support has grown**. Many communities now have an integrated management room — a “cockpit” — where camera and sensor data are gathered and emergency calls and watching-over functions are managed together.
6. **Older people's own participation has deepened**. Where they were once the object of policy and the party being supported, they now take part in running the community and delivering services, express their own needs, and often act as volunteers supporting other older people and children. The principle of “*taking the people as the foundation*” is at last taking shape in practice.

She was careful to add that digitalization is not being pursued single-mindedly: policy documents explicitly require that payment in **cash and by bank card**, and **face-to-face counter service**, be preserved — a deliberate safeguard so that the digital divide does not exclude older people from services they need.

Four examples from the field

1. Chain-type care networks — Nantong City, Jiangsu Province

Nantong has built a network in which a care facility acts as the main hub, several community service stations are placed around it, and these in turn connect to home-visiting services. Previously a community facility for older people meant somewhere to play cards or mahjong and chat, with almost no professional care. Local government recognized the limitation and has reorganized these places as **elderly service stations**, providing day services, short stay, health consultation and rehabilitation, home-visit care and home-visit nursing — more specialized and more comprehensive.

2. Meal support without building canteens — Nanjing

In one district of Nanjing the authorities abandoned the conventional approach of building a canteen in a fixed location and switched to **using the restaurants older people already go to**. Ramen shops, dumpling shops and set-meal restaurants with good reputations are certified by the administration and display a dedicated plate. Eligible older people eat there at a subsidized price using facial recognition or a card.

The division of labor is neat. Older people gain a wider choice — “*today I want ramen*”, “*today let's have steamed buns*”. The restaurants gain customers and steadier sales. The administration is relieved of the burden of maintaining its own canteens, and food-hygiene supervision is handled by the market regulation department.

3. The “three armies” approach to staffing

Care services everywhere run into shortages of people and of trained people. China's answer combines three streams:

Stream	Composition
The regular army	Specialist staff trained through cooperation between government, universities and vocational colleges
The allied army	Multi-professional teams formed by property-management companies, domestic-service firms and medical institutions working together
The volunteer army	Volunteers and time-bank schemes

The written paper renders this as the move from “*not enough hands*” to “*the three armies advancing together*”. Under the time-bank mechanism, hours volunteered while one is younger are banked as an entitlement to receive services later, either for oneself or for one's family — which also functions to draw older people themselves into participation.

4. Technology, and intergenerational space

One city has built an online **elderly service platform** that manages, in one place, information on older people in each community together with a directory of available services and providers. Offline, face-to-face support is given at local salons and service stations; online, professionals respond to consultations remotely — an explicit online/offline combination.

Finally, on resource integration and intergenerational exchange: in parts of Zhejiang and Sichuan provinces, communities have created **spaces where older people and children spend time together**. Retired people teach children to draw or pass on the games of their own childhood; the older person gains a role and a sense of purpose, and connections form with children and young people. Some places have renovated disused old houses into a “*treasure museum*” or a “*secret museum of childhood*”, where residents bring old tools, photographs and keepsakes handed down in their families, display them, and share the stories with visitors. Such places are not merely exhibition space; they are **hubs of community memory**, in which feeling as well as fact is shared — and they matter greatly to older people.

Conclusion

Professor Li did not minimize what remains unsolved: how to secure funding, how to train people and keep them, how to narrow the urban–rural gap, how to reconcile the convenience of digitalization with human face-to-face service.

Even in an age of aging and low fertility, I believe it is entirely possible to build localities where people can go on living in a way that is fully human, provided we can draw out the power of the community and the power of civil society. A realistic and hopeful future comes into view only when continuing policy from central and local government, the cooperation of business and the professions, and above all the participation and initiative of residents themselves - older residents especially - are combined. — LI Jing

She closed with the hope that colleagues from Japan and Korea might one day visit Chinese communities in person and discuss these questions in the field.

Interlude

The morning session closed with a commemorative photograph and a coffee break. The chair thanked the simultaneous interpreters working across the three languages —PIAO Meihua, UEDA Michiko, BAN Jina, NAKAHARA Ebin and NAKAHARA Yoshimine — and noted that the sweets served were from Kikyōya Orikane, a Japanese confectioner in business for 420 years, whose proprietor was serving on the local organizing committee.

Part 3 — Case Reports

Six case reports followed the keynotes — two from Japan, two from Korea and two from China. Where the keynotes described systems, the case reports described what actually happens when a bus route is withdrawn, when a grandmother can no longer reach the supermarket, when a village school's approach road is blocked by illegally parked cars, or when someone is dying at home and there is nobody trained to sit with them.

3.1 Community-Building Organizations in Nabari City

With a focus on mutual-aid volunteering

TABATA Junya · Chair, Nabari District Community-Building Council (*Nabari-chiku machizukuri kyōgikai*)

Mr. Tabata opened by saying that since the keynote had already covered Nabari's position and demographic trajectory, he would talk instead about “*what it looks like from inside.*” His report was about how one district builds arrangements, how new projects get started, and above all about *Otagai-san* — a paid-volunteer scheme for mutual support among residents.



TABATA JUNYA presenting the first case report

The city and the district

Nabari lies about 60 km from Osaka and 100 km from Nagoya, at the junction of the Kinki and Chūbu regions, with a population of roughly **73,000**. It was a post town on the pilgrimage route to Ise and prospered in the Edo period as a castle town of the Fujidō family; after the war it grew rapidly as a commuter suburb of the Osaka conurbation. Today population decline and aging are advancing together, the aging rate is **around 35 percent**, and the town center is hollowing out; from a peak of about 80,000 the population has fallen by more than 10,000. The city also faces a serious fiscal position, having declared a **fiscal emergency** about twenty years ago and now facing the exhaustion of its adjustment reserves within a few years.

It was against that background, and out of the recognition that the fields the administration cannot cover would keep growing, that community-building organizations were established at elementary-school-district scale, on the principle: “**as far as possible, let the locality carry the locality's business.**” The Nabari District Council was born as one of these.

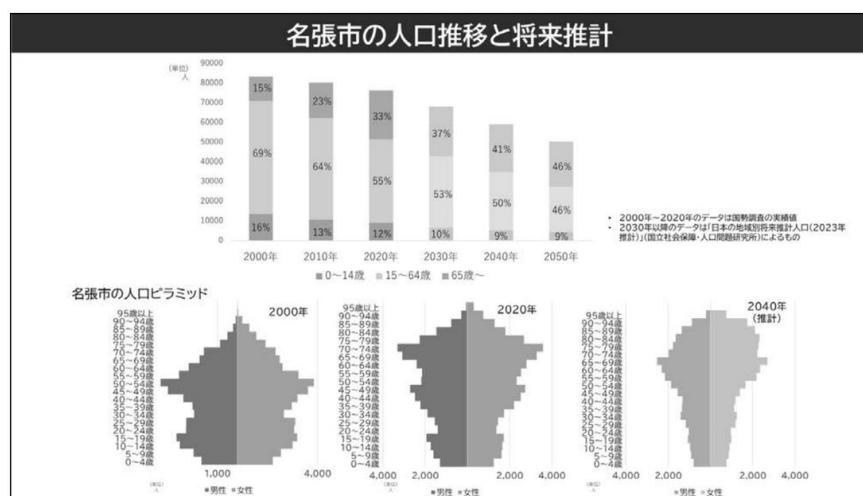


Figure 3.1 Nabari City's population, 2000–2050, by age group with population pyramids below. The 65+ share rises from 15% to 46%; the 15–64 share falls from 69% to 46%. Actuals to 2020; projections thereafter (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2023).



Figure 3.2 “A new start for community-building.” Nabari’s twenty-year sequence: 2002, merger talks among seven Iga-district municipalities; January 2003, a referendum in which residents chose independence; April 2003, subsidies consolidated into a block grant the locality itself directs; 2005, the Basic Ordinance on Self-Government enacted. The banner: “We make our own locality ourselves.”

How the Nabari District Council is put together

The Council is composed of **19 ku** (neighborhood associations). It forms sub-committees by field — education, welfare, culture and so on — which run local events, welfare checks and places for children.

Mr. Tabata offered a useful image: the Council is the “*head office*”, and around it stand a variety of projects and organizations like “*subsidiaries*.” Among them are a children’s canteen, a community café called *Yottede~ko*, a small-scale childcare business (*Hiyawan Kodomo-en*), a river improvement committee and a special committee on vacant houses. Each is given as much autonomy as possible; the secretariat and the chair act as **coordinators** so that all of them line up with a vision for the district as a whole.

The Council’s basic goal and future direction

Basic goal: “An attractive town where the original landscape of Nabari and human warmth are alive.”

- ① Community-building that makes use of local culture and historical resources
- ② Community-building that values the rich natural setting and makes people want to walk about in it
- ③ Community-building full of energy and bustle
- ④ Community-building where people support one another and live enjoyably
- ⑤ Community-building that gives young people dreams and hope
- ⑥ A safe town where people can live without anxiety, resilient in disaster

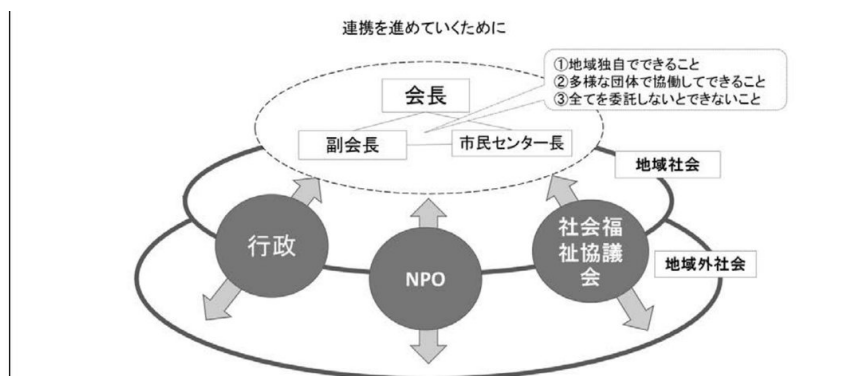


Figure 3.3 “In order to advance cooperation.” Around the chair, vice-chair and head of the Citizens’ Center sit the administration, NPOs and the Council of Social Welfare. Every task is sorted into: ① what the locality can do alone; ② what needs collaboration; ③ what must be wholly contracted out.

Starting from “what can we do?” rather than “that’s the city’s job”

When a problem arises, Mr. Tabata said, the Council’s first move is not to leave it to the administration but to ask **what the locality itself can do**.

- **Childcare waiting lists.** Nabari District once had a serious shortage of nursery places. The Council took the lead, consulted the city, asked a local business for help, and established a **small-scale community childcare facility on the third floor of the Aeon Nabari shopping center**. A private operator eventually took over the running — but the project would never have happened if the locality had not first said it wanted to do it.
- **Vacant houses.** As dangerous derelict houses increased, the district set up a **Special Committee on Vacant Houses**. For “specified vacant houses” at risk of collapse, the 19 *ku* have worked as one with the city, the *ku* chairs and the city administration acting together, in some cases as far as administrative execution. Where a vacant house is usable, the Council is looking for ways to use it as community space or a local hub, working with the Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad and general incorporated associations.

Nabari Otagai-san — the mutual-support scheme

Alongside these “hardware” problems, the Council has put its energy into the small difficulties of daily life. **Nabari Otagai-san** — roughly, “*we’re all in it together, Nabari*” — provides, as **paid volunteering**, the kinds of support that fall outside the reach of long-term care insurance: collecting someone’s medicine, accompanying them to visit a family grave, tending the garden, being someone to talk to.

The scheme dates from about thirteen years ago, when Mr. Tabata established a *Hometown Exchange Sub-Committee*. Under the then mayor’s vision of an “*ideal home of welfare*”, the city provided ¥1 million of support and the scheme began.

How Otagai-san works

Membership. Everyone registers as a **full member** on the same footing — the person receiving support and the person giving it alike. The annual membership fee is ¥500.

Charge. The user pays **¥500 per hour**, part of which goes to the volunteer as a token of thanks.

Needs assessment. A survey of residents was carried out to identify needs, and the services offered were built from the results.

Process. The user contacts the office with a request; the office arranges a supporter.

Premises. A vacant house is used, housing the office plus **eight salons for older people** and **one children’s playground**.

Living support. Weekly meal delivery, doubling as a welfare check on older people living alone — **about 120 users**, with roughly **20 cooking volunteers working in four shifts**. Also household help, garden pruning, weeding and similar.

Mobility support. A pick-up and drop-off service for hospital visits and shopping. Drivers are required to take a safe-driving course.

The area it covers — the Nabari district, the old town center — has a population of around **5,800** on the figure given in his written paper (he cited about 6,500 for the district as a whole during the panel session), and is markedly aged. About **1,700 people are aged 70 or over**, and **more than 450 older people live alone**. For them, Mr. Tabata said, *Otagai-san* has become an important piece of infrastructure supporting daily life.

Usage has risen more than **tenfold** since the scheme began, and now exceeds **2,000 mutual-aid service transactions a year**. More than half the volunteers are themselves in their seventies.

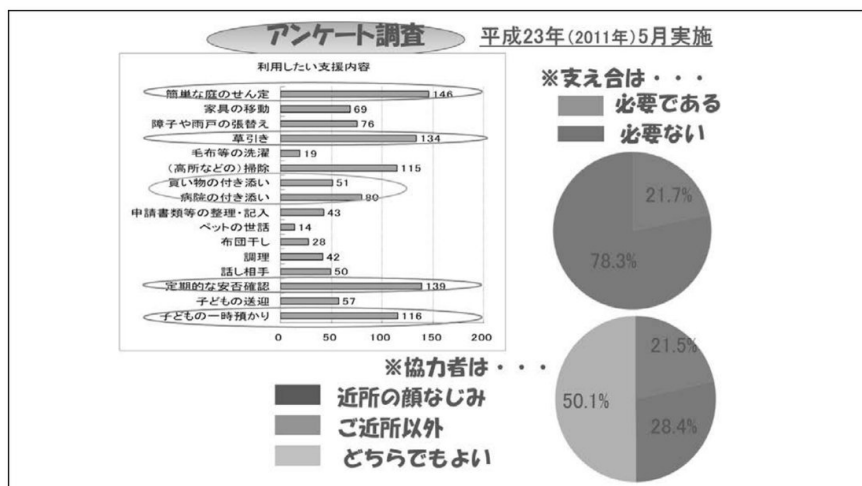


Figure 3.4 The May 2011 needs survey that shaped the scheme. Left, support residents said they would use (responses): hospital accompaniment 180 · garden pruning 146 · welfare checks 139 · weeding 134 · temporary childcare 116 · cleaning high places 115, down to pet care 14. Upper right: 78.3% said mutual support is needed. Lower right, preferred helper: 50.1% “either is fine”, 28.4% someone from outside the immediate neighborhood, 21.5% a familiar face nearby.

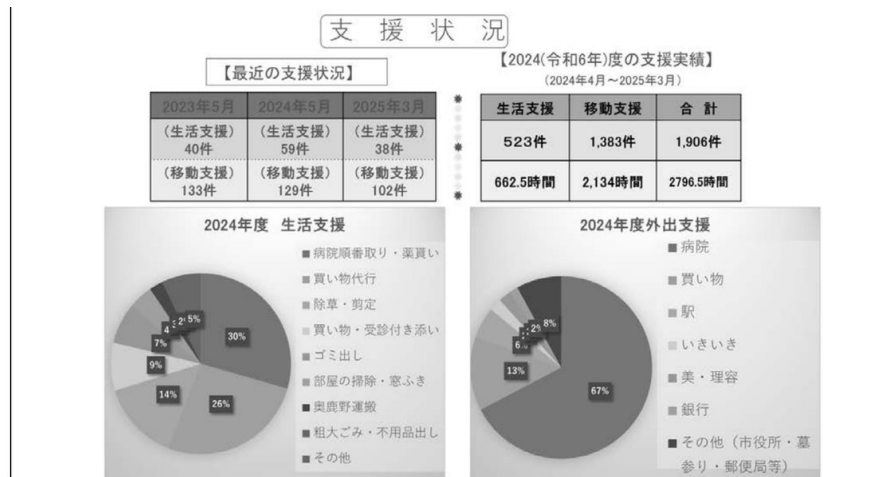


Figure 3.5 The support record. FY2024 (April 2024–March 2025): **523 living-support and 1,383 mobility-support cases — 1,906 in all, and 2,796.5 hours of volunteer time.** The pie charts break the year down: living support is dominated by queuing at hospital and collecting medicines (30%), shopping on someone's behalf (26%) and weeding and pruning (14%); outings are overwhelmingly to hospital (67%), then shopping (13%) and the station (6%).

An older tradition, and a newer experiment

Mutual support in the Nabari district did not begin with *Otagai-san*. More than **thirty years ago**, before the Community-Building Council existed, a meal-delivery volunteer group called ***Puchi-tomato*** began delivering meals to older residents every Wednesday and checking that they were well; it now has about **100 volunteers** and serves roughly **100–110 users**. What Mr. Tabata singled out as its real achievement was its governance: **the chair of its executive rotates annually**, and this has become established practice.

Passing the office round and keeping going for thirty years — that is an extremely good model. Whenever I think about starting something new in the Nabari district, I take their meal-delivery work as my example.

— TABATA Junya

Building on that experience, the district has begun an experiment in “**a new community welfare through art**”, run with Nagaoka Institute of Design in Niigata Prefecture and Tokyo University of the Arts through a research society Mr. Tabata chairs. An associate professor from Nagaoka has taken a base in central Nabari called the *Machi no Zukō-shitsu* — “the town's art room” — staying for extended periods to run workshops and make work with residents. The keyword is ***tokimeki***, the quickening of the heart: the excitement of the person making the work and of the person looking at it. By valuing the moments in which a person is moved, the project is searching for a form of welfare in which older people, children and people with disabilities can all take part. It is about a year old and still in the trial-and-error stage; the intention is to spread what is learned across Nabari, then further afield.

The difficulty

Mr. Tabata was candid about the problem that shadows all of this. **The members who have carried the running of these schemes have not changed in more than ten years, and they are aging.** How to widen the participation of younger generations, and how to hand roles on, is — he said — a worry common to every locality, and one Nabari is confronting right now.

Nabari is a small town, but we go on walking toward a “sustainable society of coexistence”, cooperating with a variety of organizations, developing local coordinators, and drawing on the power of art and culture.

— TABATA Junya

3.2 The Role of Intermediary Support Organizations

Promoting residents' self-government and community welfare through the Iga City Council of Social Welfare

HIRAI Shunkei · President, Iga City Council of Social Welfare (a social welfare corporation)

Mr. Hirai introduced himself with a biography that explains the standpoint of his report. He joined what was then the Ueno City Council of Social Welfare in **1983** as a part-time worker and has stayed in the welfare world ever since. He is now its President, represents the Mie Prefecture Association of Certified Social Workers, and is the resident priest of a small local temple — three roles that, he said, let him speak from the perspectives of both the locality and of welfare.



HIRAI SHUNKEI presenting the second case report

Iga City, and the Residents' Self-Government Councils

Iga City lies in the north-west of Mie Prefecture, roughly midway between Osaka and Nagoya, about an hour from either. It developed as a castle town in the Edo period and is now a junction of rail and expressway, with industrial estates and housing developments. In **2004 six municipalities merged** to create a new Iga City with a population of over 100,000; subsequent aging and decline have brought it to about **84,000**.

The key to making the new city liveable, Mr. Hirai said, was the **Residents' Self-Government Council** (*jūmin jichi kyōgikai*). There are **38** of them, one for each elementary-school district. Beneath them sit roughly **300 neighborhood associations and ku**, and beneath those, finer units called *kumi* and *han* — about **3,300** of them.

The kind of face-to-face community that used to be the old “village” still survives, in layers. What we value is the idea that we do for ourselves what we can do for ourselves, and we protect our own locality ourselves.

— HIRAI Shunkei

What the Council of Social Welfare does

The six municipal Councils of Social Welfare merged at the same time as the municipalities, forming today's Iga City Council of Social Welfare — universally abbreviated in Japanese to *shakyō*. Its role, Mr. Hirai said, is that of an **intermediary support organization standing between the locality and the administration**, supporting the work residents themselves undertake. Four functions define it:

Function	What it involves
Running the Community Welfare Network Conference	A forum in which the 38 Residents' Self-Government Councils, <i>minsei-iin</i> (volunteer welfare commissioners), welfare organizations and businesses come together to share the difficulties and needs arising in their area and think about solutions together.
Deploying Community Social Workers (Community Welfare Coordinators)	Specialist staff who go into each locality, help run the Network Conference, and work alongside residents who have put their hand up saying “ <i>I'd like to try that.</i> ” They build project plans together, support grant applications, and advise on the money side — including through fundraising technique — so that activity can continue.
Supporting community business	Helping with fund-raising and business planning so that a resident's idea can grow into a continuing enterprise.
Running the Volunteer Center	In ordinary times a hub for citizens' activity; in a disaster, the Disaster Volunteer Center.

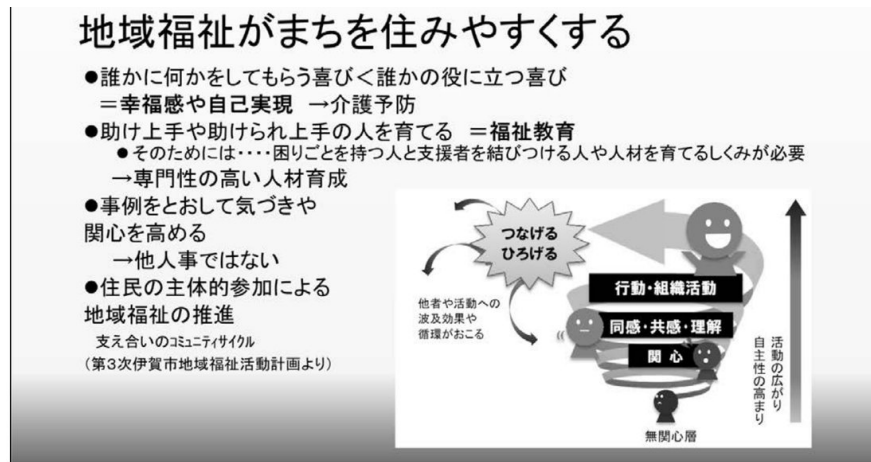


Figure 3.6 “Community welfare makes a town easier to live in”, from the 3rd Iga City Community Welfare Activity Plan. Its chain: the joy of being helped and of being useful → wellbeing and care prevention; raising people good at helping and at being helped → welfare education; connecting those in difficulty with those who can support them → skilled staff. The diagram at lower right shows the “cycle of mutual support” — from indifference through interest → empathy → action and organized activity, with rising autonomy on one axis and the spread of activity on the other.

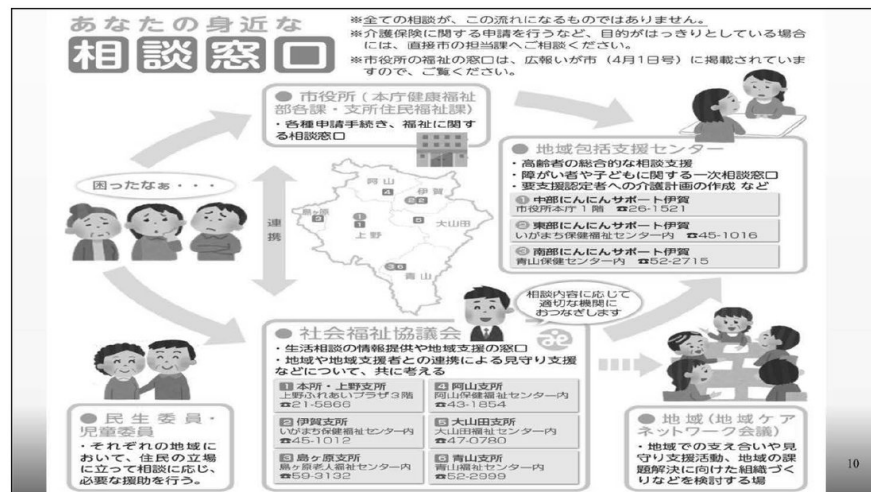


Figure 3.7 “Your nearby consultation desk” — the public-facing map of where to take a problem in Iga City: the city hall for applications and welfare consultations; three Community Comprehensive Support Centers for consultation on older people, people with disabilities and children, and care plans; the Council of Social Welfare and its six branch offices for daily-life consultation and watching-over; the minsei-iin in each locality; and the Community Care Network Conference, where mutual support and local problem-solving are discussed.

Four cases

1. Dā-ko Kitchen — a children's canteen and book café (Ueno-seibu district)

The setting is an old shopping street in the Ueno-seibu district. Aging and falling birth rates had thinned the foot traffic and empty shopfronts were becoming conspicuous. On the children's side there was a parallel problem: **eating alone** as more households had both parents in work, school refusal, and nowhere safe to spend the after-school hours.

The proposal — to use an empty tenancy to create a **children's canteen with a book café** — came from residents themselves. The Council of Social Welfare was involved from the first consultation: organizing the aims into a written plan, supporting the grant application, and brokering introductions to local farmers, the consumer cooperative and businesses.

Today **more than thirty local restaurants, businesses and individuals** cooperate, providing ingredients and volunteering. Children eat and use the space free of charge; adults pay a price that doubles as a donation. Children's voices have returned to the street — and a circuit has begun to form, in which students who once used the place come back, grown up, as the people running the learning support.

2. The shopping bus, run by NPO *Yui no Sato* (Tsuge district)

In the Tsuge district of Iga, aging and the surrender of driving licenses had produced a visible problem of “**shopping refugees**” — people who could no longer get to a supermarket.

The Council of Social Welfare conducted a survey, secured grant funding, and ran a **one-year trial** of a bus that carried people free of charge from near their homes to the shops, in partnership with a major supermarket chain. When the trial ended there were strong calls to continue, so **two Residents' Self-Government Councils in the district jointly established the NPO *Yui no Sato* in April 2012 to take over as the operating body. The Council of Social Welfare supported the incorporation procedures and the operating plan; local residents who became NPO staff took on the practical work of setting routes, registering users, managing bookings and assisting people on and off.**

Routes now extend over a wide area of the city. And the effect goes beyond transport: because people ride together, they talk. The bus has become an **occasion to go out and a means of preventing isolation.**

3. *Mori no Café Ikoiko* — a community café (Tsuge district)

Also in Tsuge: the building of a **disused nursery school** has been turned into a permanent café — something the locality had long wanted. Residents and the community-building council together set up an NPO; the Council of Social Welfare helped with establishing the corporation, negotiating the facility-use contract with the city, and advising on operations.

It now serves handmade lunches and tea, and functions as a **multi-generational hub** — salon activity, events for children, and meal delivery to the day-service.

4. The “Suwa model” of community transport (Suwa district)

Suwa is a mountain district where the aging rate approaches **60 percent** (the written paper gives “over 56 percent”). When the bus route was withdrawn, residents themselves established **NPO Sasayuri** and began a **door-to-door pick-up and drop-off service using light vehicles**, on a paid basis.

Every resident of the district is an NPO member. Fit older people and women drivers take the wheel as volunteers. The Council of Social Welfare supported the launch through the national subsidy system, workshops, study visits to advanced areas and surveys. The scheme has grown into something now known nationally as the “**Suwa model**”, and attracts study visits from across Japan.

What the cases show

Mr. Hirai drew three results from these experiences:

1. **Places where people can be at ease** — for children, older people and people with disabilities, across the generations — have been created in one locality after another.
2. **Residents' own sense of self-government has grown:** the conviction that *we will solve our locality's problems ourselves*, and with it the skills and networks that make it possible.
3. **The Council of Social Welfare, as an intermediary support organization, has become a hub** — translating residents' voices into concrete projects and connecting them to money and people.

He was equally clear about what is not solved. Every locality shares the same difficulties: **a shortage of leaders and volunteers, and the difficulty of securing a stable financial base.** There is also a widening **gap between localities** that are moving ahead energetically and those that cannot get started. Meeting these requires human-resource development, and a strengthening of the bridging function — locality to locality, organization to organization — which the Council of Social Welfare must develop further.

What can be said from Iga City's experience is that it is difficult to maintain a local community on the systems and plans of the administration alone. Between the frameworks made by the city and the assembly, “gaps in the system” inevitably open up. What fills those gaps is the residents who live in the locality — and the role of the intermediary support organization is to run alongside them so that what residents feel can take a concrete form.

— HIRAI Shunkei

His concluding formulation was that the Council of Social Welfare's role is *bansō* — accompaniment, literally

“running alongside” — going beyond the administration's system, staying close to residents and drawing out their capacity. The aim, pursued in continuous collaboration with the Residents' Self-Government Councils and the many other actors in the area, is **“a local society where anyone can live in safety and with dignity.”**

3.3 Building Sustainable Local Communities in a Society of Population Decline

Korean and Japanese cases

LEE Jiatec · Visiting Professor, Department of Social Welfare, Seoul Theological University; Chair, Academic Committee, Korean Society for Nonprofit Organization Research

Professor Lee's report was explicitly comparative. Its object was to analyze how Korea and Japan are responding to population decline, aging and the risk of local extinction, and on that basis to make plain **the significance and the limits of volunteer policy and of “relational population” policy.**

Both countries, he noted, are losing population at among the fastest rates in the world. In rural areas and in small and medium-sized provincial cities in particular, the outflow of young people to the large cities, the concentration of older people and the weakening of social capital have put the maintenance of local community in serious jeopardy. Simple instruments — policies to raise the birth rate, or economic support — cannot on their own resolve it. Hence the question he posed: **how, even while population is falling, can a sustainable community be formed?**



LEE JIATEC presenting the third case report

Korean policy developments

Korea has moved to strengthen the institutional base:

- In **2021** the Ministry of the Interior and Safety designated **89 areas nationwide** as **“population decline areas”**, and support through the **Local Extinction Response Fund** began in earnest.
- In **2022** the concept of ***saenghwal ingu* — the “living population”** — was introduced, covering not only registered residents but commuters, tourists and consumers, thereby correcting the limitations of conventional population indicators.
- The **hometown love donation system** (*gohyang sarang gibu*), in force from **2023**, functions as a new mechanism binding urban residents financially to rural and provincial areas.

These instruments have produced results in laying a foundation for responding to decline. What is needed next, he argued, is **direct linkage with volunteer policy**. In particular, the fact that volunteering in Korea is heavily concentrated in the **retirement generation** must be corrected, and the disparities between localities addressed.

Japanese policy developments

Japan has established the concept of ***kankei jinkō* — “relational population”** — as an institution and linked it to a range of policies. The **Regional Revitalization Strategy of 2014** formalized a three-stage distinction between the **settled population**, the **exchange population** and the **relational population**, positioning as an object of policy those groups that maintain a continuing involvement going beyond mere residence or a single visit.

The representative instruments are:

- the **hometown tax donation system** (*furusato nōzei*);
- the **“second hometown” community-building projects**;
- the **Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad** — the system that dispatches young people from urban areas to rural districts;
- **workation** programs.

These have encouraged urban residents to form long-term, emotionally invested relationships with rural and

provincial areas, and some have led to actual relocation or business start-up. Japan has also, through the **Community-Based Integrated Care System**, integrated volunteering with medical care, nursing care, housing and daily-life support, laying a base on which older people can go on living in their locality with dignity. Professor Lee gave particular praise to the **volunteer point system**, under which hours of volunteer activity are used rather like a local currency:

It is highly regarded as an institutional innovation that secures continuity and the motive to participate at the same time.

— LEE Jiateg

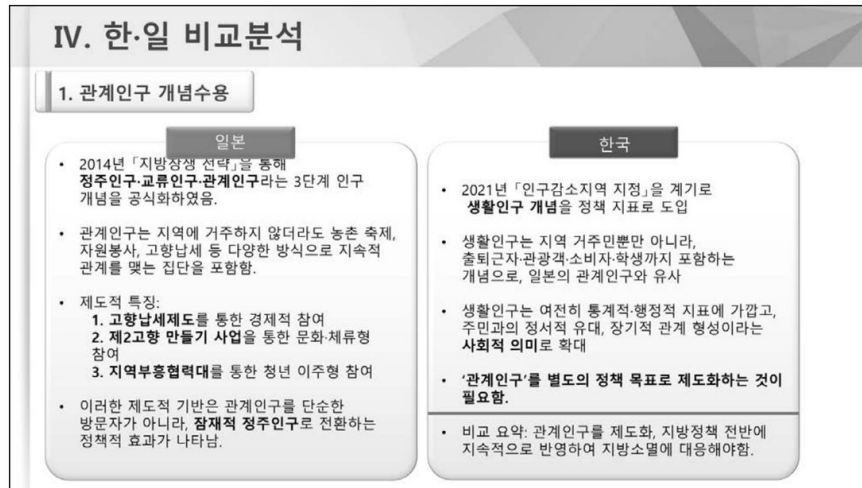


Figure 3.8 Japan–Korea comparison, part 1: the institutional reception of “relational population”. **Japan** (left) — the 2014 Regional Revitalization Strategy formalized settled / exchange / relational population, with economic participation via hometown tax, stay-based participation via “second hometown” projects, and relocation-type participation via the Cooperator Squad, converting visitors into a **potential settled population**. **Korea** (right) — the “living population” concept introduced after the 2021 designation of population-decline areas includes commuters, tourists, consumers and students, but remains closer to a statistical measure. The conclusion: Korea should **institutionalize relational population as a policy objective in its own right**.

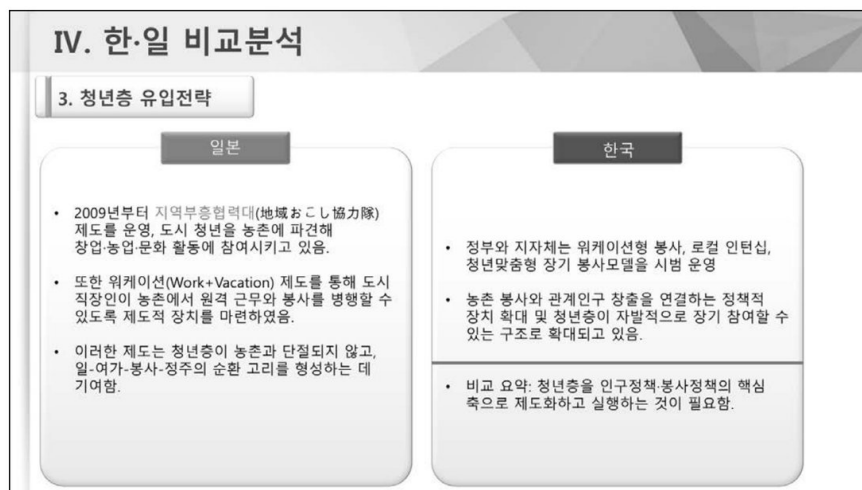


Figure 3.9 Japan–Korea comparison, part 2: strategies for drawing in young people. **Japan** — the Cooperator Squad (since 2009) and the workation system together form a circuit of work–leisure–service–settlement. **Korea** — trials of workation-type volunteering, local internships and long-term youth volunteer models. The conclusion: **young people must be treated as the central axis of both population policy and volunteer policy**.

Five common tasks

From the comparison Professor Lee derived five shared agenda items:

1. **Institutionalizing the relational population.** Settled, exchange and relational populations must be clearly distinguished and each positioned as an object of policy.
2. **Strengthening the linkage between volunteer policy and population policy.** Volunteer point systems and community-based integrated care are the available instruments.

3. **Institutional support for the inflow of young people**, as the response to local extinction.
4. **Data-based performance management**, through volunteer management using digital technology.
5. **Active use of ICT**, building digital infrastructure into the management of both volunteering and relational population.

Policy proposals

His recommendations were four:

1. **Accept the concept of relational population institutionally**, and build a policy system founded on long-term relationships that go beyond the “living population”.
2. **Strengthen the linkage between volunteering and population policy**, so that volunteer activity is not confined to supplementing social services but functions as a **structural device securing the sustainability of the locality**.
3. **Put in place institutional arrangements that actively invite in young people**, and expand new models — workation, local internships, start-up-linked volunteering.
4. **Let Korea and Japan learn from each other's strengths**, developing institutional stability, digital infrastructure and management systems in a complementary way.

In a society of population decline, volunteers and the relational population are not merely supplementary presences; they are the core social infrastructure supporting a sustainable community. By institutionalizing the lessons drawn from one another's cases, and by solving common problems collaboratively, Korea and Japan can open up new possibilities within a society of population decline.

— LEE Jiatec

Keywords of the paper: population decline · aging · local extinction · volunteering · relational population · community-based integrated care · Korea · Japan.

3.4 Gyeongsangbuk-do's Principal Measures against Population Decline

and the challenges ahead

CHO Deukhwan · Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Population Center, Gyeongbuk Institute

Dr. Cho reported on the work of a single Korean province. Korea has **17 wide-area local authorities** — the counterpart of Japan's 47 prefectures — and Gyeongsangbuk-do is one of them: in the south-east of the country, with a population of about **2.5 million** and the **largest land area** of any Korean province.

It is a place where history and industry coexist: **Gyeongju**, the ancient capital of Silla; **Pohang**, developed on steel and shipbuilding; **Gumi**, a concentration of the electronics industry; **Andong**, a town of traditional culture. This is the region that underpinned Korea's industrial development. Today population decline and aging are advancing rapidly there, and it has reached a major turning point.



CHO DEUKHWAN presenting the fourth case report

1. The demographic position

	Korea as a whole	Gyeongsangbuk-do
Turning point	Population peaked in 2020 and turned to decline	Half or more of the province's municipalities are already classified as population-decline areas
Projection	Statistics Korea projects a fall from about 51.8 million in 2020 to roughly 37 million by 2070	The Institute's own projection suggests decline may be faster still than the official national projection

	Korea as a whole	Gyeongsangbuk-do
Aging	Working-age population (15–64) falling sharply; the 65+ population continuing to grow strongly	Aging rate about 26% as of 2020 , well above the national figure of about 20% — more than one provincial resident in four is aged 65 or over
Natural decrease	—	In 2020 alone the province lost about 15,000 people to natural decrease

Aging is concentrated in the farming and mountain villages, where outflow and natural decrease compound one another and the maintenance of local society itself is becoming difficult. In these circumstances, Dr. Cho argued, a change of mindset is required: the aim can no longer be simply “**to increase the number of people**”, but rather **how to build a structure of living, and a system of community care, appropriate to an aged society.**

2. The integrated population policy model

Working in tandem with the national government's support policy for population-decline areas, Gyeongsangbuk-do has constructed an **integrated population policy model** which treats local industry, education, young people and migrants as a single ecosystem. It has three pillars.

Pillar 1 — Universities as hubs: the “campus town” settlement platform

The province has several universities. These, the municipalities and local businesses are linked into a **campus-town-type settlement platform**. While still students, young people intern or join projects at local firms; after graduation they can go straight into employment there. Housing support, and support for marriage and child-rearing, are packaged with the job so that young people can go on living in the area.

Because each local authority has different industrial strengths, each concludes agreements with universities matched to its own industries, and works consistently from human-resource development through to employment.

Pillar 2 — Making use of migrants: the Regional Visa Pilot Project

Aging and youth outflow have produced serious labor shortages across agriculture, manufacturing and care. Gyeongsangbuk-do is therefore running a **Regional Visa Pilot Project** to receive foreign workers actively.

Under it, **the province itself takes the lead** in planning the numbers of foreign technical and care personnel required in each field, and determines visa screening and scale in coordination with the national government. In **2025–2026** the plan is to receive, on a trial basis, roughly **350 foreign technical and care workers each year**. The intention is not merely to plug a shortage on the ground but to have them take root in the locality and live alongside existing residents as fellow residents.

Pillar 3 — A “second life” in the countryside for city dwellers

The third pillar helps people living in cities move to the province and lead a second life there.

- The **Rininmaeul (neighboring village) project** makes concentrated investment in localities so that each can overcome population decline by drawing on its own distinctive products and natural setting.
- Vacant houses are renovated into **small houses with gardens**, lent to urban residents for a fixed period so they can try out living in the area.
- The **Living Young People's Laboratory** targets young people, who plan their own projects and try out small businesses and community activities locally — the aim being to move them along the path **from relational population to settled population**.

These three are not pursued separately: universities, businesses, local authorities, migrants and urban residents are deliberately designed to link up as **one ecosystem**.

3. The “Happiness Concept for Low Birth Rates” and the child-rearing model

Korea has the lowest fertility of any OECD member, and Gyeongsangbuk-do is no exception. Cash-transfer approaches — childbirth grants and the like — have been tried, and it has become clear that they do not by themselves achieve much.

The province therefore launched a **“Happiness Concept for Low Birth Rates”** (*jeochulsaeng haengbok gusang*), placing the emphasis not on childbirth alone but on **raising the quality of life of children and parents**. It has since been developed into what is called *“Season 2 of the great transformation on low birth rates.”*

The concept sets **30 key tasks across six fields** — pregnancy and childbirth, child-rearing, education, housing, employment, and local community — with the aim of building a comprehensive child-rearing ecosystem.

The flagship: *Ai Cheonguk* — “Child Heaven Village”

Ai Cheonguk is a **community-based model of child-rearing**, in which children and parents grow together with the locality.

Stage 1. Create hubs, like a *Mother Center*, centered on children and mothers. Two types: converting disused leisure facilities, or networking existing nurseries and child-rearing support facilities.

Stage 2. Develop those hubs into an intergenerational **“village of nurture and affinity”** in which young people and older people also take part. Implementation ahead of the field is planned in **seven municipalities within the province between 2026 and 2029**.

What the hubs provide, in one place: health management and preventive vaccination in cooperation with health centers and hospitals; learning and care programs in cooperation with schools and nurseries; parent–child courses and cultural activities in cooperation with libraries and cultural facilities; play space for children and rest space for parents; and coworking space supporting home working and start-ups.

The design idea: a single place where **child-rearing, work, learning and exchange happen simultaneously** — a hub for the locality. It resembles Germany's *Mutter-Zentren*, but is distinctive in binding community care much more tightly to economic activity.

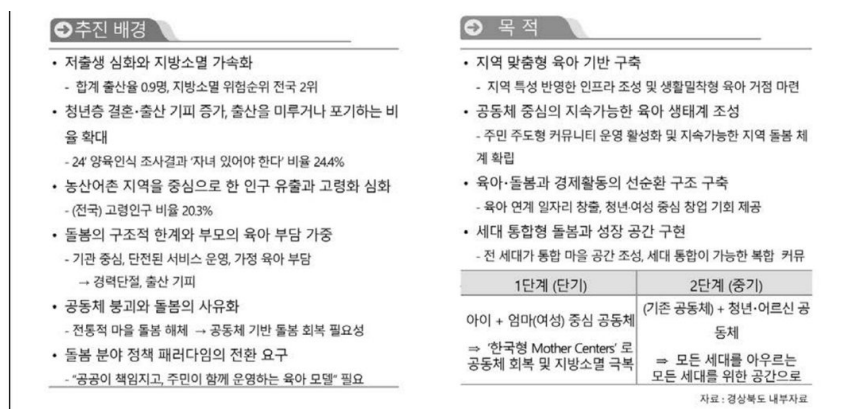


Figure 3.10 The background and objectives of *Ai Cheonguk*. Left, the case for action: a total fertility rate of 0.9 and the **second-highest local-extinction risk ranking in the country**; only **24.4% in a 2024 survey saying a child “must be had”**; aging concentrated in farming and fishing districts against a national 65+ share of **20.3%**; fragmented, institution-centered care leaving the burden with households; and the dissolution of the traditional village care unit — hence the demanded paradigm shift toward **“a child-rearing model for which the public sector takes responsibility and which residents run together.”** Right, the objectives: locally tailored infrastructure; a resident-run child-rearing ecosystem; a virtuous circle between child-rearing, care and economic activity, with jobs and start-up opportunities centered on young women; and integrated intergenerational space. Source: internal materials, Gyeongsangbuk-do.

4. Remaining challenges, and the role of civil volunteering

Dr. Cho set out the provincial government's own objective: to have in place, **by around 2030, “the foundations of a sustainable population.”** Achieving it requires using a limited budget effectively and constructing an **evaluation system that measures policy outcomes objectively**.

At the same time, the fields that the public sector cannot handle alone are increasing. Adjusting national policy to local circumstances, and integrating multiple projects in the field, requires that **local authorities and private organizations strengthen their collaboration as partners**. Population decline and the contraction of living infrastructure easily become a vicious circle, and securing minimum infrastructure in medical care, transport, education and the rest is a large question.

It is at this point that **civil volunteering** becomes decisive. In an aged society, Dr. Cho argued, it is impossible for public services alone to meet all the care and welfare needs. Volunteers must therefore be positioned not as

“auxiliary staff for the civil service” but as **actors who sustain and regenerate local society**.

Concretely, that means:

- **living support, learning support, cultural activity, and the running of local festivals and events** for older people, children and newcomers — maintaining the connective tissue of community and nurturing local pride;
- creating “**warm ground for reception**” so that young people and foreign residents arriving from the cities can settle into the locality — work Dr. Cho identified as an important task specifically for volunteers.

To do that, three things are indispensable: **developing a younger generation of volunteers; organizational management capable of sustaining activity continuously; and institutional and financial support** linking government population policy with volunteer activity.

I want to go on searching for arrangements in which volunteers are respected as partners making the future of the locality. This is a message from a small province, but I hope that by sharing our experience with everyone in East Asia, and learning from one another, we can get through this common crisis together.

— CHO Deukhwan

His written paper adds a sober coda. Uncertainty remains, and it is hard to imagine the population reversing in the near future. What Gyeongsangbuk-do's work demonstrates is rather how **a local authority can combine short-term countermeasures with long-term structural reform**, integrating policies to slow decline with strategies to overcome low fertility, so as to ease the imbalance in population structure and raise the resilience of local community.

The paper also lists the priority tasks explicitly: efficient use of the budget (prioritization between projects, avoidance of duplication, sustainable financial management); construction of a policy evaluation system with regular assessment and feedback; strengthening public–private cooperation, since population problems cannot be solved by local authorities alone and a collaborative model involving businesses, citizens' organizations and residents is required; and strengthening basic living infrastructure — transport, medicine, education, childcare — both to raise quality of life and to attract the younger generation.

3.5 Love, Always

Responding to aging through community development

JIANG Yinyue · Executive Vice President, Love Eternal Volunteer Association (愛在始終 / *Ai Zai Shizhong*), Yingtan City, Jiangxi Province (*presented by recorded video*)

Editorial note

In the original Japanese proceedings, the section numbered 3.5 carries a transcript of the Beijing presentation rather than of Ms. Jiang's; the chair noted at the time that the two Chinese presentations had been given in the reverse of the printed order. The account below therefore follows **Ms. Jiang's own written paper and presentation slides**, which set out the work of the Love Eternal Volunteer Association. The Beijing material appears in its proper place at 3.6.

Origins

The **Love Eternal Volunteer Association** of Yingtan City was founded after its originator, **Peng Ying**, nursed his mother-in-law through her final illness and came to feel acutely the need for **hospice care**.

The organization's core philosophy is “*care across the whole cycle, participation across many dimensions, empowerment in depth.*” Its stated aim is a society in which **every life can meet its final stage in love, in peace and with dignity**, and the value it holds up is a posture of “*always thinking of others, putting service first.*”

The structure of the work

Strand	Content
1. Professional hospice care	Focused on end-of-life needs: dignified companionship, care for peace of mind, psychological support — hospice services grounded in humanity.
2. A multi-layered life-care network	Home visits to “empty-nest” households and older people living alone; cultural programs and festival visits in residential facilities for older people. These supplement both practical living support and emotional connection within the locality.
3. Cultural and educational activity	Life education for citizens and for young people; promotion of a culture of filial piety and respect for age, fostering harmony in the community. This contributes to cultivating a considered view of life and death and to strengthening the cultural foundations of the work.
4. Releasing the vitality of the “silver generation”	Training fit younger-old people as volunteers, forming a model of mutual aid among the silver generation itself , and promoting the realization of value in later life — that older people should have something to do and something to enjoy.

Outcomes

Twelve years of the Love Eternal Volunteer Association

Social impact: services provided to **more than 3,000 terminally ill patients in 16 provinces and cities over 12 years**. Volunteer support for older people amounts to **50,000 volunteer-instances and 140,000 hours in total**, with **more than 2 million beneficiaries**.

Recognition: awarded the *Outstanding Volunteer Service Project* prize by the Central Propaganda Department and the Central Office for Spiritual Civilization, among numerous provincial and municipal awards; sustained coverage in the mainstream media has given the work a high public profile.

Organizational growth: from a handful of people at the founding to **more than 400 today**. Core members are drawn principally from the families of those who have been cared for — producing a community-type organizational culture in which “**love and accompaniment**” is a shared inheritance.

What the case suggests

Ms. Jiang's paper draws four lessons:

- 1. The effectiveness of pluralistic, whole-cycle care.** An integrated approach that unites end-of-life care, living support and cultural education proves its usefulness in supporting older people.
- 2. The combination of humanistic care with local culture.** The soil of filial piety and respect for age contributes to the continuous cultivation of a volunteer spirit.
- 3. Activation of the community's foundations.** Training volunteers, resident participation and the expansion of mutual-aid networks strengthen the resilience of local society.
- 4. Value as a reproducible governance model.** Collaborative governance built on “*volunteer service + cultural permeation + community activation*” is a **low-cost, high-warmth, highly reproducible** model of community elderly care, with strong potential for application in other localities.

The practice of Love Eternal has important exemplary significance for East Asia, where population aging is advancing, as a community-based model of elderly care rooted in cultural values and in local initiative. It offers findings that will contribute to the future development of community welfare policy and of participatory governance.

— JIANG Yinyue

3.6 Community Philanthropy as a Driver of Local Development

Practice in Chaoyangmen Subdistrict, Beijing

WANG Yanzhen · Deputy Director and Senior Researcher, Research Center for Social Service Development in the New Era, Beijing Information Science and Technology University; founder of the Xicheng Community Foundation

This was Mr. Wang's second time at the Forum — he had first taken part eight years earlier in Shenzhen. His report had five parts: the shared East Asian problem; the reality confronting Chinese society and the shape of one Beijing community; concrete community-building combining public support, self-help and mutual aid; the hints that emerge; and the outlook for East Asia.



WANG YANZHEN presenting the sixth case report

The shared problem

Japan, China and Korea are all facing rapid aging and low fertility, differing only in degree. This is no longer the problem of one country alone. From the latter half of the 21st century into the 22nd, East Asia may well be standing at the leading edge of a current that humanity as a whole will experience.

— WANG Yanzhen

The transition, he said, is from “a society in which people keep increasing” to “a society that is mature and in which people are decreasing.” Within that, how can people go on living securely and happily on the basis of the locality? That is the great question the three countries share.

Chaoyangmen: an old Beijing neighborhood with an office district next door

Mr. Wang lives in the **Chaoyangmen** district of Beijing. The name derives from a gate that once stood on the eastern side of the old city wall; the area preserves stretches of old city wall, *hutong* alleys and *siheyuan* courtyard houses. Nearby stand the prestigious **Second Middle School, with 300 years of history**, and a **primary school of 200 years**. It is an area dense with cultural property and protected old dwellings — the “old Beijing” in strong color.

Immediately alongside, however, are office towers where young white-collar workers are employed. Because housing prices in the center are high, young households cannot easily go on living there and return to homes in the suburbs at night. **The result is that the daytime community is dominated by older people.** In his area, people aged 60 and over make up **about 30 percent** and those aged 65 and over **about a quarter** of the population.

In his written paper Mr. Wang describes Chaoyangmen as an area with a **dual character**: a protected zone of historical and cultural landscape, and at the same time a business development zone. The **Beijing Community Philanthropy Foundation** works with the subdistrict to explore how community philanthropy can address the twin problems of **aging with low fertility** and **the hollowing-out of community**.

Public support, self-help — and the gap between them

The Chinese government has been building up public services — pensions, medical insurance, low-rent housing — and many older people can manage on a pension plus their own home or government rental housing. But between public support (*gongzhu*) and self-help (*zizhu*) lie **many “gaps in living”**. What matters there is the third pillar, **mutual aid** (*huzhu*), and that is where private social organizations and volunteers come in.

Five practices

1. “Love Route to School” — improving the environment around a historic school

The *hutong* around the 300-year-old Second Middle School were narrow and jammed with illegally parked cars; the road surface was uneven and it was dangerous for children to walk. The administration recognized the problem but, constrained by budget and by competing priorities, could not get to it.

So the community's charitable body **called for donations**, and asked businesses and residents to help. Mr. Wang's

paper gives the sum raised as **CN¥1.75 million** from corporate donations. With it, the road was repaved, traffic rules were put in order, and separate parking space was secured. Working with the Party organization, the school and the residents' committee, volunteers repeated the appeals — “*please don't park here*”, “*let's protect the children's route to school*” — and the alleys became safe to walk.

This project became a good example of a case where it was neither “the government does everything” nor “residents struggle on alone”, but the administration, businesses, residents and social organizations tackling the problem together.

— WANG Yanzhen

The model he draws from it is “**corporate donation + monitoring and participation by residents.**” More than repairing a road, he said, it grew the consciousness that “**the route our children take to school is ours to protect.**”

2. “Warm Homes” — replacing household appliances

Going round the community, the team found a good many older people — some living alone, some with disabilities — whose income was a pension only and who could not afford to replace household appliances. A refrigerator broken, a washing machine that would not run, an old heater as the only source of warmth. In that state, health suffers.

Working alongside the government's appliance-replacement support scheme and using donated funds, the project delivers **new refrigerators, washing machines, rice cookers and similar** to the households that need them. It also supplies equipment that lifts the quality of daily life a little — soy-milk makers, foot spas. During the **2024 Spring Festival period, 29 older people received appliances worth a total of CN¥58,000**, and were able to pass a warm winter in comfort.

In parallel, young volunteers and fit older volunteers visit homes to teach people how to use the equipment, repair what is broken, and accompany people shopping or to hospital — including going with those who cannot manage a bank or a hospital alone.



Figure 3.11 “Warm Homes appliance renewal.” Volunteers installing and demonstrating donated household appliances in older residents' homes in Chaoyangmen Subdistrict, Beijing — a soy-milk maker being explained (left), a new refrigerator being delivered (center), and a foot spa in use (right).

3. Food and a place to be — the community canteen

As people age, cooking becomes hard. The community therefore created a **canteen for older people**, combining **government subsidy, corporate donation, residents' own contribution and charitable funds** so that nourishing food can be had at a modest price.

In central Beijing a lunch set of a meat dish, a vegetable dish and soup costs about **CN¥20**, of which the older person pays **CN¥10**, the remainder being covered by subsidy. But the canteen is not merely a place to eat: it hosts birthday parties, health lectures, classes on preventing fraud, and a range of other exchange activity. Primary-school children come to sing, or write the character *fu* — good fortune — as a gift, so it becomes a place of **intergenerational exchange** as well.

Mr. Wang's written paper gives this a name: the “**6+6” food assistance** system — a sustainable food-support

arrangement in which government, business, residents, charitable bodies and volunteers can all collaborate, built as **meal support + birthday parties + schools + mutual aid**.

4. Coping with digitalization

In China, everything from hailing a taxi to paying for shopping to banking now presupposes a smartphone. Convenient as that is, it is a large barrier for people not used to the device. At the same time, cases of **targeted fraud against older people** — including by groups operating out of South-East Asia and elsewhere — are increasing.

The community therefore runs classes in which **young volunteers teach older people how to use a smartphone**, and creates spaces where the tactics of fraudsters and the countermeasures are learned together.

For an older person to become able to handle a smartphone is not merely a matter of convenience; it matters for social participation and for safety.

— WANG Yanzhen

5. The time bank

In Beijing there is a shortage of people to do household support and light care, and buying private services is expensive. The answer devised is a **time bank** in which residents — including fit older people — exchange time with one another.

If an older person cuts a neighbor's hair, does their nails, or helps with cleaning, that time is **“deposited” in an account**. When they themselves come to need support, they can draw on the banked time and be helped by others.

The paper places this within a project called **“Sicheng Action and Leling Linren”** — “happy-age neighbors” — a time bank enabling mutual aid **among older people themselves**. Mr. Wang acknowledged that operation and record-keeping still present difficulties, but described it as an attempt to give the spirit of *otagai-sama* — “we help each other” — a concrete form, which he wants to refine further.

A sixth, unusual case: the stray cats

Mr. Wang closed his examples with what he called a slightly unusual one. Stray cats are a problem common to every country: they bring comfort to a locality, but also noise, fouling and scavenged rubbish. Some older people, fond of cats, cut into their own living costs to feed them, which causes friction with neighbors. Equally, the view that *“it is not right to spend tax money on cats”* is entirely reasonable.

The community therefore raised **charitable donations rather than using the government budget**, and built arrangements for training volunteers and managing the cats properly — the standard **TNR** approach of trapping, neutering and returning, together with managed feeding. It went further and created a **cat character, “Chao Kitten”**, selling goods and using the proceeds as activity funds, so that the work can sustain itself. Through an appealing character, the importance of animal welfare and of the local environment is conveyed to children and young people.

At first sight this is “a story about cats”, but it is in fact an extremely contemporary theme — how do we share public resources, and how do we make affection for animals and the hygiene of the local environment compatible?

— WANG Yanzhen

His written paper describes the wider frame for this strand as **“home = community support station”**: over seven years, micro-grant projects supporting **100 residents across five communities**, of which the launch of the Chao Kitten intellectual property is one product; and, alongside it, **Party-building and good community governance**, aimed at constructing a *“public-benefit community.”*

What East Asia can take from this

Mr. Wang's paper sets out the common logic he sees at work.

The core gene: mutual aid among neighbors

China's **volunteer time banks**, Japan's *chōnaikai*-style mutual aid, Korea's **community activity centered on the village head** — all of them demonstrate the philanthropic and public-benefit potential held within an **“acquaintance society.”**

All three inherit the same Confucian cultural tradition: *“the virtuous person does not dwell alone; there will surely be good neighbors”*, and *“wishing to establish oneself, one establishes others”*.

From that he drew three points in his spoken remarks:

1. **Mutual help between neighbors is a strength the three countries share.** Japan's *chōnaikai*, the role of the Korean village head, China's time banks and volunteer organizations — all connect deeply with values inherited from Confucian culture.
2. **Three-way collaboration between government, business and civil society is the key** to sustaining community in an age of population decline. Government alone cannot solve the problem; nor can business alone; nor NPOs alone. The **bridging role** — drawing in external resources and drawing out internal capacity, with the community foundation at the center — grows steadily more important.
3. **Community philanthropy requires creative devices rooted in culture and daily life.** The route to school through the *hutong*, the historic school, the stray cats, the birthday parties, *tai chi* — these look small, but precisely because they are chosen for their deep connection to residents' everyday lives and feelings, participation grows and projects last.

Two proposals for the future

In the version of these remarks recorded in the proceedings, two concrete proposals were put to the meeting:

1. **Share experience and tools.** Community foundation operating manuals, volunteer training handbooks, models for running elderly canteens — translate the concrete know-how being practiced in each place and build arrangements to share it. A ***Japan–China–Korea Public-Benefit Youth Exchange Camp***, in which young people from the three countries experience community activity together, would be a good place to raise the next generation of civic leaders.
2. **Keep meeting and keep exchanging.** Actually visiting one another's communities, eating together, doing *tai chi* together, doing volunteer work together produces learning and trust that no written report can convey. Delegates were warmly invited to come to Chaoyangmen — to walk the *hutong* with residents, take lunch in the canteen, and meet the volunteers.

Two further directions are named in the paper: **youth participation** through the trilateral exchange camp, and **standardizing age-friendly community services** as the response to aging.

There is a phrase in the Confucian classics, “it is the neighborly relation that is most beautiful.” We in East Asia already share a culture that honors harmony. On that foundation I hope we can face the common problems of population decline and aging, learn from one another's best practice, and build together communities filled with love, with courtesy and with trust.

— WANG Yanzhen

The written paper closes on the same note, binding the communities of East Asia together with the proposition that **“it is virtuous conduct that shapes the excellence of a local society”** — harmony, and the good.

Part 4 — Panel Session

Coordinator: FURUSAWA Koyu · Chair, Japanese Executive Committee; Visiting Professor, Research and Development Initiative, Kokugakuin University

Panelists: NAWATA Yoshihiko · CHO In Sook · TABATA Junya · HIRAI Shunkei · LEE Jiatec · CHO Deukhwan · WANG Yanzhen



The panel session, with the screen listing the coordinator and panelists

The coordinator's framing

Professor Furusawa opened by naming what the reports had in common. The social systems and the cultures differ, he said, but at the root there is a shared set of problems — **low fertility, population decline, and behind them rapid aging.**

He then widened the frame considerably. Some regions, Africa among them, are still expected to grow. But the long-term UN projections have world population **peaking in the second half or toward the end of the 21st century** and thereafter, into the 22nd century, humanity as a whole — *homo sapiens* as a whole — entering a phase of decline.

We are precisely at the turning point where the curve is bending slowly from the age of rapid increase toward an age of maturity and contraction. And East Asia is at the leading edge of it. Japan is already in population decline and a super-aged society; China and Korea, with some lag, are on the same curve. As population peaks and society matures, how do we live better on the basis of the local community? This is a task common to the three countries and, in the long run, a task facing all of human society, which we in East Asia are thinking about ahead of the rest.

— FURUSAWA Koyu

The design of the session followed from that: because systems, histories and cultures all differ, there is a great deal to be gained from communicating, comparing and drawing hints. He invited each country in turn to say what had struck it in the others' reports, what it wanted to hear more about, and how its own situation differed or resembled.

4.1 First round — the shared foundation and the differences

NAWATA Yoshihiko: “medium welfare, medium burden”, and the three grounds of mutual aid

Professor Nawata opened. He said his own keynote had touched on it only briefly, but the structure of local community across East Asia — and South-East Asia too — seems to him to have **considerable commonality**. He added a wry note: when he says this to Chinese research colleagues, he is sometimes told firmly that “*it is not so simple as to lump us together*” — and yet, he thinks, a common foundation exists.

His analytical proposition was the one from his keynote, restated for the panel. East Asia is neither the Nordic **“high welfare, high burden”** model nor the Anglo-American **“low welfare, low burden”** model, but what he calls **“medium welfare, medium burden.”** The public sector does not comprehensively guarantee people's living; correspondingly, a large role is expected of people's **self-help** and of the locality's **kyōjo — mutual assistance**.

What, then, is that mutual assistance grounded in? Here he drew a three-way contrast:

	The basis of mutual assistance	Current condition
Japan	Traditionally, territorial ties (<i>chien</i>) — neighborhood associations and the networks running through them, which functioned to a degree as a safety net for daily life	Those territorial organizations are weakening under aging and out-migration; the situation is now, in his word, <i>critical</i>
Korea	He has heard that during the era of military dictatorship something resembling Japan's neighborhood associations was introduced from above ; this was received quite negatively in the process of democratization and much of it has now disappeared. New systems such as the Residents' Self-Government Council are being introduced, but his understanding is that, compared with Japan's territorially based livelihood security, kinship — family and relatives — is relatively stronger	In addition, religious and moral value systems — Confucian ethics, Christian ethics — appear to him to function as a culture of mutual support
China	Hearing the Chinese reports again, he felt that Confucian moral views and the traditionally nurtured culture of “honoring one's elders and connecting the generations” play a large role in how mutual support in the locality is conceived	—

My honest sense is that the three countries of East Asia, for all their differences, share the values of “valuing family and neighbors” and “supporting one another across generations.” — NAWATA Yoshihiko

WANG Yanzhen: the shared characters, and a proposal for community-to-community travel

Mr. Wang agreed. Political systems certainly differ, he said, but the underlying goals are the same: **“value the people”**, and above all **“let older people live happily.”** The stage of economic development and the social system differ by country, but the wish to make the local community better, and to have older people spend the second half of life pleasantly and without anxiety, is held in common.

He tied this to a much longer inheritance. In Confucian thought, **xiao** (filial piety) and **ren** (benevolence); in the older Huang-Lao tradition; and in the long-told ideal of a society in which **the generations are connected, the family is valued and people help one another**. The vision of **datong** — the Great Unity, a world in which all live together in peace — still lives, he said, deep in our values. The forms and institutions differ by country, but the final goal feels to him the same.

Then a more personal observation. This was his first visit to Japan, and what struck him strongly was a **“mysterious sense of closeness” created by Chinese characters**. Walking around town, seeing *kanji* on signs and information boards, the general meaning is immediately clear. Even on software screens, when *kanji* appear, *“ah, this is what that function does”* is understood intuitively. The languages differ, but through the shared medium of the characters, meaning is transmitted.

This shared written culture built by our East Asian predecessors is a genuinely wise inheritance. In that sense I think the “root” of us as East Asians is connected. There is a common foundation as a kanji cultural sphere, and on top of it sits each country's own culture and institutions. Being able to reconfirm that has been a large gain from this meeting.

— WANG Yanzhen

From that he made a proposal. It would be a waste, he said, to keep this kind of exchange to specialists and government officials. He would like to draw **ordinary citizens, and especially retired older people**, into the circle.

Looking at the tourism market, it is the older generation that travels most actively: they have time, and a degree of financial room. So why not go beyond the plain sightseeing tour to something like **community-to-community exchange travel**? Local communities in the three countries could form partnerships as *“friendship communities”* and

visit one another's areas. Not only touring the famous sites, but singing together at the community hall, teaching one another *tai chi* and *bon-odori*, shopping at the market and cooking together, celebrating a birthday.

He noted how much of the festive calendar is shared: **Duanwu, the Mid-Autumn Festival, Lunar New Year; Japan's New Year and Obon; Korea's Chuseok.** At such moments, he suggested, an **international community event at which each household brings its own festive dishes to celebrate together** would be genuinely enjoyable and genuinely meaningful.

CHO In Sook: an argument for franker talk, and the “medical desert”

Dr. Cho began with a caution about the day's own proceedings — the most pointed intervention of the session.

I gained a great deal of learning today. At the same time I found myself thinking again, “am I being a little too pessimistic?” — because the cases introduced here were all extremely successful ones. Seeing successful cases is a great joy and a great encouragement. But the reality is that on the fundamental problem of regional population decline, no decisive solution is yet in sight.

— CHO In Sook

How are we to combine our strength across countries and get through the question of *how to face population decline in the regions*? For that, she argued, **beautiful language is not enough**: what is needed is a new kind of forum where people can speak with their guard down and talk to each other honestly. She is, by her own account, someone who likes plain, sincere argument — which may be why she felt it especially.

Her reasoning: the presenters had introduced a variety of policies and systems, all well conceived and actually being carried out. “*Listening to the explanations alone, you might think: well then, there is nothing much to worry about?*” But reality is not so simple. Policies exist, and yet they do not necessarily reach every locality and every generation sufficiently. That gap is where her sense of crisis and of pessimism lies.

She then reported a conversation from the car with Mr. Iino on the way in, about why Nabari's population is now falling. This, she said, is not a Nabari story: the same thing happens in Korea, in China, and in Taiwan, which she has researched for many years. Among the many problems of rural and provincial areas, one in particular is deepening — **the “medical desert”**: areas spreading where there are too few doctors and medical institutions and people cannot reach the medical services they need. In France the same phenomenon is called **désert médical** and has become a major social issue; **millions of people in France** are said to have no family doctor within reach and to suffer inconvenience of access.

The consequence for regional policy is uncomfortable:

One would expect many people to hope to live out their later years slowly in the countryside. In reality, the older you become, the more you want to live in a suburb from which it is easy to get to a hospital. Many older French people talk about moving to the country after retirement, but in practice — thinking about access to medical care — they are said to choose somewhere as close to a city as they can. Not having medical care nearby is that large a source of anxiety.

— CHO In Sook

The same logic, she noted, was visible in the Nabari account: aging rises, the young leave for Osaka and Nagoya — and older people may in future hope to live in cities like Osaka or Tokyo where medical resources are abundant.

On young people the structure is similar. They must go to the cities for work; and they also tend to prefer large cities as places offering stimulus and varied experience. “*The better we raise them, the more they aim at the big city.*” This structure, she suggested, is common to Korea, Japan, Taiwan and much of Europe — which is exactly why the imbalance between the regions and the capital, or between the regions and the great cities, has to be thought about **not only in terms of population and economics but across medicine, welfare, education and culture.**

She closed the round with a direct question to Professor Lee: **what are the concrete methods for drawing young people into volunteer activity?** If effective methods exist, she said, they would be of great value to Japan, to China and to other countries too.

4.2 Second round — young people, foreign residents and coordinators

Professor Furusawa picked up the question and put it to the two Japanese hosts: how are Nabari and Iga actually drawing young people in and raising them as bearers of volunteering and community-building?

HIRAI Shunkei: Iga's foreign residents, and disaster-volunteer leadership

Mr. Hirai answered with a fact that surprises many visitors. Iga City's population of about 84,000 includes **more than 5,000 foreign residents — roughly six percent**, which is conspicuously high within Mie Prefecture and about **twice the national average**. People from Brazil, Vietnam and the Philippines among many other nationalities live there, and in-migration continues.

The city has made **multicultural coexistence a pillar of municipal policy**, with a consultation desk for foreign residents, mother-tongue support and employment support, pursued as a comprehensive program.

Within that diverse local society, the Council of Social Welfare recently ran a **Disaster Volunteer Leader Training Course**. Many foreign residents took part — and, he said, an increasing number of **young foreign residents say, “when a disaster comes, I want to help Japanese people.”**

Iga's aging rate exceeds **33 percent**, and there are many older people who cannot lift heavy objects or move easily. That is precisely why, he said, great expectations are now placed on the locality's young people and its foreign residents to act as bearers in an emergency.

TABATA Junya: 6,500 people, a wheelchair experiment, and the coordinator as “node”

Mr. Tabata began by correcting the question gently — not Nabari City but the **Nabari district**, a community of about **6,500 people and 3,500 households**.

Set beside the Korean and Chinese cases, he said, the problem there takes a different form: the connection is loosening in a particular way. What used to be taken for granted anywhere in Japan — the relation of **otagai-sama** (“we're all in it together”) and “*being close to your neighbors*” — has gradually thinned and become awkward. He confessed to feeling something in which nostalgia and loneliness are mixed together.

The next day, he noted, was Nabari City's comprehensive disaster drill. All **19 ku of the Nabari district** would take part, and would run a **social experiment**: *how many people does it actually take to get someone who needs assistance to an evacuation center in a wheelchair?* Verifying concrete evacuation routes in this way, he argued, is extremely important for designing disaster measures that fit the locality's real conditions — in a district where aging continues and the city-wide aging rate now exceeds **34 percent**.

On the question of bearers, his answer centered on a single role:

Nabari's arrangements for supporting daily life put at their center the coordinator who connects people to people. In medical terms this is close to a care manager — a node that ties the person in difficulty to the support they need. We spent two years training coordinators before we launched, rebuilding relationships of trust among citizens and carefully constructing arrangements rooted in the locality.

— TABATA Junya

He added a frank observation from the many study visitors Nabari receives: in a great number of localities, similar arrangements **never get off the ground**. The blunt diagnosis offered by those visitors is that the top of the locality attaches a budget to the idea and the project remains something with no purchase on reality. Which suggests, Mr. Tabata concluded, that **how to raise leaders** and **how to move budget and system** are the core of community-building.

The coordinator's synthesis: points, relational population and a two-way youth exchange

Professor Furusawa drew the strands together. In Korea, he noted, there had been a vogue for overseas volunteering and cultural-exchange programs in which “*a young person lives abroad for a month.*” Why not the reverse — **a scheme under which young people from other countries live in Japan for a year**, learning the locality's traditional culture during their stay and teaching older residents how to use digital tools? A relationship of mutual learning like that, he suggested, would make a very good circulation.

From the Korean experience of volunteering there had also come the view that **young people develop professional capacity through volunteering**. That need not happen abroad; it is possible within Japan, and the connection with local residents would in fact be a large part of the learning.

And then the **relational population** thread: the proposal that when a young person comes to a locality and volunteers, the time spent should be made **visible as points** and accumulated, so as to build a continuing relationship. This, Professor Furusawa noted, connects to the **Volunteer Management System (VMS)** already introduced in practice by some Korean local authorities and NPOs, and is an idea with real potential for motivating young people.

The problems Iga and Nabari face are by no means peculiar to them; they are shared by Korea, China, Taiwan and elsewhere. At the same time, the concrete circumstances differ from place to place — the increase in foreign residents, the outflow of the young, the thinning of community, aging, disaster response. Which is exactly why, taking an international perspective, the question of how to design arrangements that suit each locality matters — and why a place to bring that knowledge together is important.

— FURUSAWA Koyu

On the point system in particular he was enthusiastic. Society as a whole is digitalizing and young people are entirely at home with apps and online systems. For them, making the hours and content of volunteering **visible as points** is highly intuitive and motivating. And if those points can later be exchanged for local services, or for support when they or their family grow old, then **“helping now” and “security in the future” are joined up** — a perspective, he said, well worth sharing across East Asia.

CHO Deukhwan: Korea's short history of self-government, and the transport desert

Dr. Cho responded to Professor Nawata's account of Korea, beginning in Japanese — he studied in Japan and, as he put it, the Japanese comes out unbidden — before continuing in Korean.

His own sense, he said, is that Korean society still carries a **strong color of central-government leadership and administration-centeredness**. Korea's local self-government system was legislated as long ago as **1950**, but did not function properly in practice thereafter; full-scale restoration, with residents genuinely electing heads and assemblies, came only **from the mid-1990s**. Looked at historically, not much time has passed since local authorities began to be run autonomously at all.

Consequently the **division of roles between central and local government**, and the **relationship between local government and residents**, have not matured to the point where one could really call it self-government. How to advance decentralization from here is a large task.

The role of the private sector is a second and different task. Government takes the lead in policy — but how are private NPOs, community organizations and citizens' groups to cooperate with government and carry roles? How can government and the private sector collaborate as **equal partners**? This too, he said, is an important theme Korean society must resolve.

He then made an admission that echoed Dr. Cho In Sook's:

I introduced the work of the Korean local government I know. But is it functioning smoothly everywhere in the country? Certainly not. In reality, however excellent a measure may be, there are limits to delivering it properly to every single resident. Those who receive the benefit are, unavoidably, a portion of the people. Who fills the areas it does not reach, and how — thinking about that, cooperation with private bearers is indispensable, not local government alone.

— CHO Deukhwan

He offered a specific institutional idea. Beneath Korea's basic local authorities sit sub-units — **dong, eup** and **myeon** — whose heads are appointed and dispatched. These are the positions **closest to the field**, and they ought, he suggested, to be posts that residents themselves can choose. If residents elected their own representatives, and those representatives connected administration and locality, and if this were properly institutionalized, the degree to which local voices are reflected in policy would rise — and public-private cooperation would advance with it.

On the private side he was measured: in rural areas long-established residents' organizations are still active; in the cities, diverse citizens' bodies and residents' self-government organizations are being born. But asked whether this

has spread nationwide, the honest answer is that it is **still only halfway**. That is why, he said, learning from Japanese and Chinese cases as had happened that day carries such weight.

His final point was an observation about Iga that had struck him hard:

*Alongside the advance of aging, **transport in the countryside** has become a major problem — and this is exactly the same as Korea. There too, route buses are being abolished and reduced, and areas called “transport deserts” are increasing. It is becoming hard for older people to get to a hospital or to the shops, and the very base of daily life is threatened. The example introduced from Iga, where residents and the administration together build mobility support and living support as one, will be extremely instructive for a great many Korean localities.*

— CHO Deukhwan

4.3 From the floor

Professor Furusawa opened the discussion to the hall, asking particularly for voices from the participating countries and from the many young people present. Five contributions followed.

A participant from Beijing — on time banks and points

The first questioner works in Beijing in an organization concerned with **social relations**, doing community and social-welfare work. Her organization is developing something similar to the point system discussed — **a mechanism for accumulating time**: getting more residents, and young people especially, involved in volunteering; accumulating the hours as points; and letting them draw on those points when they themselves need support. In China too, she noted, mutual-aid **time banks** attract attention as *a new response to an aged society*, on the argument that service given when young connects to security later. Her question to the Korean participants: **how, concretely, is the point system operated — and what devices make it sustainable?**

A young participant from China — on cross-border youth placements

A younger Chinese participant was taken with the idea of young and older people crossing national borders to enter a community for a fixed period — **half a year, or a year** — and conducting international exchange there. He wanted to know more concretely **what work and activities such young people would engage in on the ground, and in what settings they would interact with local people**. Mutual visits among the participating countries, he suggested, would deepen the ties between localities and generate intergenerational exchange as well.

A young Japanese participant — a challenge to the direction of policy itself

The sharpest question of the session came from a young Japanese participant working in the field. In response to population decline, he observed, every country has developed a range of policies, and every country seems to have moved in a broadly similar direction under the familiar vocabulary of *jijo* · *kyōjo* · *kōjo* — self-help, mutual aid, public assistance: personal responsibility, mutual help among residents, and systems and subsidies to support both.

But standing in the field, one sometimes thinks: is there not a problem with the direction of the policy itself? Are you genuinely convinced that this present direction is right — or are you thinking, “there is no other option, so we simply have to keep this policy going”? That, it seems to me, is what is being asked.

— A participant from the floor

He put the question directly to the Councils of Social Welfare, to the bodies above them, and to Professor Nawata: after long years of pursuing policy in this direction, **do you think this direction is truly appropriate — or do you feel obliged to continue while carrying a dilemma?** Professor Furusawa undertook that the Japanese Panelists would respond in the closing comments.

A Japanese participant — on *tai chi*, *bon-odori* and the performing arts

A further questioner had been struck by Mr. Wang's repeated references to *tai chi*, and wanted to know how it actually relates to daily life in Beijing's communities and to the connections between people. In the Nabari and Iga area, he observed, *bon-odori* and local festivals — and the *ondo*, the sung refrain that drives the dancing — are one of the cores of local activity; he was therefore very interested to know **what role folk performing arts, dance and**

song play in local communities in China and Korea.

WANG Min, Ritsumeikan University — disaster, diversity, and the history of time currencies

The final floor contribution came from Wang Min of Ritsumeikan University, who spoke first in Japanese and then in Chinese. His field is **disaster prevention**, with a great deal of fieldwork on earthquake damage, and from that experience he strongly endorsed Dr. Cho's caution:

If we grasp the situation of aging and low fertility purely as a “problem”, no complete solution will be found. This is a condition that society will go on carrying as a premise, and it seems to me more realistic to think about how to maintain our localities while getting along with that condition.

— WANG Min, Ritsumeikan University

As a foreign national doing research in Japan, he added, his fieldwork has convinced him that **the participation of people who have come from overseas is an extremely important point** for revitalizing localities and securing diversity. Foreign residents are increasing in Japan, and policy on migrants is advancing step by step in Korea; for **China**, responding to that kind of diversification will become a major theme.

His question, put in Chinese to Mr. Wang Yanzhen and Professor Li, concerned the **time bank** — which he understood as depositing the time spent helping others in an account as **time currency**, to be withdrawn when one needs support oneself. Japan, he noted, attempted time currency **from the 1970s** with the **Volunteer Labor Bank** and **Fureai Kippu** (“caring-relationship tickets”). He therefore asked for more detail on time banks in China: **in what kinds of area, at what scale, and how are they operated as an institution?**

4.4 Closing comments from the three countries

With the afternoon field visits to follow, Professor Furusawa asked for a one-minute comment from each country by way of summing up.

NAWATA Yoshihiko — three uncomfortable questions

Professor Nawata thanked the questioner from the floor and Dr. Cho for views that were, he said, frank, severe and painful to hear, and asked that these points be taken up properly at a future gathering.

1. **Why has fertility fallen this far?** *“We have raised a great many policies and slogans, but the young people who matter are not really trusting us.”* It may be, he suggested, that **we adults — and older men in particular — have created the very conditions in which a person cannot help feeling, in their heart, that “I do not want to have and raise a child in this society.”** Without that severe self-examination, we cannot talk about low fertility at all.
2. **Young people's participation in community.** Analysis of the citizens' questionnaire in his current Machida City research has produced a good deal of material for self-reflection. *“Young people don't come to the locality”, “they don't participate”* — this is said often; but **we adults may be unknowingly foreclosing their opportunities to participate, and building a structure that fails to receive young people's voices properly.**
3. **How far should volunteering carry monetary counter-payment?** Several Japanese contributions had referred to **paid volunteering**; China had offered point systems and time banks; from Korea there had been little on payment. The question is deep and many-sided: not merely the ethics of taking money when it is supposed to be volunteering, but **how local mutual support can be made sustainable in an aging society, and how the value of care labor is to be evaluated.** There had been no time to enter it; he hoped for continuing discussion across the three countries' different systems and cultures.

CHO In Sook — festivals as intergenerational infrastructure

Dr. Cho, who had spoken mainly about the Gyeongbuk region, wanted to make clear that **this is not Gyeongbuk's problem alone but a task carried by the whole of Korea.** A great many Korean local authorities are wrestling with **how to position their festivals**: traditional performing arts such as the **Hahoe Mask Dance of Andong** and the **Jain Danoje of Gyeongsan**, which attract international attention, alongside newer festivals tied to local culture — K-pop

events, food festivals built around ***gimbap***.

These festivals are important not merely as tourist events but as devices that create connection between the generations. Children through to older people take part together, sing, dance and eat — and through that, local pride and identity are nurtured. Japan and China have any number of festivals with the same elements. Seen that way, festivals are a cultural resource common to the whole of East Asia.

— CHO In Sook

She insisted equally on the **economic dimension**: many Korean food festivals genuinely revitalize the local economy, since visitors from the cities use local shops and lodgings. Her example was **Geumcheon**, which has tied its place name to the *gimbap* culture of the popular chain *Kimjane*, combining place name and food culture in an event designed to draw visitors from outside.

CHO Deukhwan — how Korean point systems actually work

Answering the Beijing questioner directly, Dr. Cho reported that **some Korean local authorities have introduced schemes in which taking part in volunteering accumulates points**, usable to enroll in lifelong-learning courses or to obtain discounts when traveling to another area. More recently a **local point ID** is under consideration, which would manage **tourism, accommodation and local currency in an integrated way**; if that functions well, it would be a large force in the running of local volunteering. He would have liked to give concrete cases of how such arrangements link to youth participation and intergenerational exchange, but time forbade. In any case, he concluded, **how to bind together local festivals, volunteer activity and the local economy is an important point common to East Asia**, not Korea alone.

WANG Yanzhen — *tai chi*, and the deep roots of the time bank

On *tai chi*. The three countries share a great deal of **bodily and health culture**. In China, early in the morning, older people practice *tai chi* in parks and squares everywhere; in Beijing's large parks there are many places where **volunteer instructors teach it free of charge**, so that these become sites of local health-building and of exchange — corresponding, he suggested, to Japan's *bon-odori*, its radio calisthenics, and the traditional performing arts of Iga and Nabari.

*If in future older people from the three countries could meet through tai chi, traditional dance and folk song — something like an **East Asian Seniors' Sport and Culture Exchange Meet** — it would be wonderful. Representative teams showing one another their tai chi and their dances, advancing health and friendship at the same time. I think such a vision lies on the extension of today's discussion.*

— WANG Yanzhen

On the time bank. The time one provides as a volunteer is recorded as **time currency**; when in future one needs support, one draws on it and is helped by others. In several Chinese cities this is being trialed as **a community service supporting older people's daily lives**; in Japan too, similar arrangements have existed since the 1970s — ***fureai* services**, paid volunteering, time-deposit schemes.

*In essence it is a mutual-aid arrangement of exactly the kind everyone has described: use the time you have free to help someone, and bank that time for your future self or for others. Taking **time rather than money as the unit** is also a device for keeping the supporting relationship more equal. In the three countries of East Asia there are historical traditions of mutual aid in many forms — *rinpo*, *gojo*, *hyangyak* — so an arrangement like the time bank stands on that cultural soil.*

— WANG Yanzhen

His closing wish was that the three countries learn from one another's institutions and develop forms suited to each society; and that a place like the East Asia Civil Society Forum be used to **deepen citizen-to-citizen exchange and cooperation at the private level** — building on the historical friendship, and combining community care, volunteering and cultural exchange, to make East Asia as a whole a happier region.

Professor Furusawa closed the session with regret at having to stop, and handed over to the closing ceremony.

Part 5 — Closing Session

5.1 Closing Address

FURUSAWA Koyu · Visiting Professor, Research and Development Initiative, Kokugakuin University; Chair, Japanese Executive Committee

Professor Furusawa opened by admitting that the panel had left a good deal undigested — there were several more rounds he would have liked. He hoped the continuation would be the baton handed on within the Forum, to next year's meeting and the years beyond; and he noted that the afternoon's field visits would give another chance to exchange views and fill in what the morning had left out.

Looking back across the two days he summarized the shared situation: in localities where low fertility, aging and population decline are marked and **the very foundation of community is weakening**, how is all this to be converted into a sustainable form? The question runs through Japan, Korea and China alike; circumstances differ, but everyone is struggling with it and everyone is widening cooperation.

That cooperation, he stressed, must reach **beyond the locality**: how to create a **relational population** that increases exchange between localities and young people or urban residents; and how to promote the movement of people and cooperation **across national borders**. The importance of both is rising, and this is a task the three countries share.

Looking at Asia from within the wider world

The point he most wanted to leave with the meeting — touched on only briefly during the day — was a methodological one.

We should not look only at the inside of Asia and search for an “Asian type”; we need to see Asia within the wider movements of the world.

— FURUSAWA Koyu

From the standpoint of regional cooperation in East Asia, he argued, there is a great deal to learn from **the European Union**. Countries utterly different culturally and historically, which had even experienced war with one another, overcame that antagonism to build a community, form a union and develop common policies. **The dynamism of that is a large suggestion.**

He gave two concrete illustrations:

- In the EU, **energy policy** was made common first, and from there began the movement to treat **environmental problems** integrally across borders. The environment is by nature a borderless problem, so common and integrated responses are required.
- **Agricultural and rural areas** — the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** — form one of the EU's great pillars. This, he suggested, is in fact an extremely important theme for East Asia too, and above all for countries such as Japan where aging, low fertility and population decline are advancing.

Welfare, locality, care and the sustainability of local society are a common East Asian task. Exchange on them has already begun in part, but it is an area that should be deepened much further: healthy longevity and community care; arrangements for mutual help; and **inter-regional linkage through the exchange and movement of people**. These are themes, he said, worth pursuing continuously as the East Asia Civil Society Forum.

The day's discussion had shared the basic viewpoints, confirmed both commonalities and differences, and — he judged — given the meeting a purchase on going a step further, toward new forms of cooperation and new ideas.



FURUSAWA KOYU delivering the closing

The EU's development is a reference, but East Asia has its own culture and history. Today we heard about festivals, about sport, about art and music. Drawing on that cultural richness, there is ample possibility of making new forms of cooperation as local societies. Of that I am convinced. Today has been a very important conference for that purpose.

— FURUSAWA Koyu

5.2 Closing Address from China

XU Xiaoxiao · Deputy Secretary General, China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO)

Ms. Xu said she was truly glad the Forum had been held here, beside the beautiful river at Iga. The whole event was drawing to a close — but she took it, she said, **not as an ending but as a new start**.

Over the two days a range of practices, initiatives and best practices in community-building had been introduced. She had learned a great deal from the Japanese and Korean participants, and had introduced several Chinese cases in return.

She then entered an important caveat about her own country. China is, as everyone knows, **very large in territory, with many ethnic groups and a genuinely plural culture**. The disparities between regions are correspondingly large, and conditions differ considerably between city and countryside, and between the coast and the interior.



XU XIAOXIAO delivering the closing address
on behalf of the Chinese side

The cases I have shown you are no more than a part of China, and are initiatives that reflect the characteristics of each particular place. I wanted to add that.

— XU Xiaoxiao

But the question of **regionality** — of local particularity — exists in Japan and in Korea too, she argued. Within each country there are diverse local societies. In that sense there are challenges and possibilities peculiar to the East Asian frame, and **bringing those differences and commonalities together to discuss them is the great significance of this Forum**.

Regionality differs, national character differs, historical background differs — and people carrying all those differences gather in the same place, exchange views frankly, and seek out the path of cooperation. That process is itself, I think, the very form of an East Asian civil society. As one of the Chinese participants, I feel it a great honor to have been able to take part in such a place.

— XU Xiaoxiao

She closed on the durability of the Forum itself. This was its **sixteenth** edition, and it had come this far because of the accumulated efforts, over many years, of a great many people in the three countries. Across that period the international situation had changed dizzyingly, and there had been phases in which tension ran high. **And yet, separately from relations between governments, a place for exchange at the level of citizens had continued unbroken**. That fact alone, she said, is of very great value.

That private citizens should go on facing one another in mutual trust and on equal terms; that however relations between states may waver, the mechanism of dialogue and cooperation among us should continue as long and as unbroken as it possibly can — that is my wish.

— XU Xiaoxiao

She looked forward to a full exchange of views again in Korea the following year, and thanked the organizers, the people of Iga, the presenters and everyone who had gathered.

5.3 Toward the 17th East Asia Civil Society Forum

NAM Youngchan · President, Korea Forum of Volunteerism

Mr. Nam thanked the Japanese executive committee for the very great effort that had gone into the Nabari-Iga meeting, and then set out — as provisional direction rather than formal decision — what the Korean side had in mind for the following year. Brief coordination with the Chinese and Japanese organizers had taken place the previous day.

The reasoning behind the theme was set out plainly. In discussing what to take up, the organizers had converged on a single judgment: **what is now changing our lives from the roots is digitalization, and above all the advance of AI.** There is scarcely any field, in volunteer activity or in the civil society movement, that escapes its influence.



NAM YOUNGCHAN announcing the plans for the 17th Forum

The 17th East Asia Civil Society Forum — provisional plan

Host country: Republic of Korea

Dates: three days, **October 29–31, 2026**, as the candidate dates. Detailed schedule and venue to be settled.

Working theme (tentative): “*New Roles and Opportunities for Civil Society in the Age of AI.*”

Subtitle: China and Japan were each asked to submit **two candidate proposals by the end of November**. The Korean side will consider these and settle the final theme structure.

AI can become a great crisis. But at the same time it should bring us new opportunities we have never had. What possibilities are there, and how do we make use of them? What projects and what tools can be conceived in the field of volunteering and of NPOs? These are the things I would like to think about together with our colleagues in East Asia.

— NAM Youngchan

Because how the age of AI is understood differs from country to country, he particularly hoped for proposals reflecting each side's own perspective — and closed by saying he looked forward to welcoming everyone to Korea.

Part 6 — Cross-Cutting Themes

This closing chapter has been prepared by the editors of the English edition and does not form part of the original proceedings. It draws together, for readers who were not in the hall, the threads that ran through two days of speeches from three countries — and is honest about what was left unresolved.

6.1 The demographic baseline

The figures cited across the Forum, assembled in one place, give the scale of the common problem. They come from different national sources and reference years, and are reproduced as the speakers gave them.

	Japan	Republic of Korea	China
Total fertility rate	≈1.15 (2024); 2.0 in 1960	0.81 (2021, lowest on record); ≈0.75 (2024); below 1 since 2018; 6 in 1960	Once ≈6; now a little above 1
Turning point	Early 2000s	2020 peak; decline from 2021, −0.37% in 2021 alone (≈9× the previous year's rate)	Natural decrease for three consecutive years
Long-run projection	—	≈24 million by 2100; working-age population roughly halved by 2070	—
Older population	—	≈9 million aged 65+ (2022)	≈310 million aged 60+ (22%); ≈220 million aged 65+ — the largest in the world (2024)
Speed of aging	—	—	7%→14% (65+) in 21 years
Capital-region share	≈30% (Greater Tokyo)	≈50% (Seoul, Gyeonggi, Incheon)	492 million living away from their registered <i>hukou</i>
Urban vs rural aging	—	—	10.9% : 9.7% (2000) → 23.8% : 15.8% (2020)

France served throughout as the comparator: total fertility 2.8 in 1960, about 1.7 in 2024, and only about 16 percent of the national population in the Paris region. Western Europe as a whole fell from 2.8 (1960) below the replacement threshold of 2.1 (1975) to 1.53 (2019); the world average stood at 2.2 in 2024.

Two implications recurred. **East Asia's distinctiveness is not decline as such but decline without immigration** — Europe holds its totals up by receiving migrants; Japan, Korea and Taiwan do not, and absorb the full force of natural decrease. And **the capital-region imbalance is more extreme in East Asia than anywhere comparable** — which several speakers argued is the operative problem, rather than the aggregate number.

6.2 Against the vocabulary of extinction

One striking feature of the Forum was how consistently its speakers **resisted the language their own governments and media use**. The Japanese phrase *chihō shōmetsu* — “local extinction” — spread from 2014, was translated into Korean as *jibang somyeol*, and generated a wave of alarmist reports and short-horizon spending in both countries. Three speakers pushed back:

- **CHO In Sook** produced the counter-evidence: of the Japanese settlements identified in 2010 as possibly uninhabited within ten years, **41 of 452 — 9.1 percent — actually emptied**. And a third of Korean urban residents, and a quarter of Japanese ones, say they would move to a rural area under the right conditions.
- **WANG Yanzhen** reframed the transition: not extinction but the move “*from a society in which people keep increasing to a society that is mature and in which people are decreasing.*”

- **WANG Min**, from the floor, put it most sharply — treating aging and low fertility purely as *a problem* guarantees no complete solution will be found, because **this is a standing condition of the society, not a temporary defect in it.**

CHO Deukhwan's formulation of what a provincial government should now be attempting reads as the policy translation of the same insight: the aim is no longer simply “to increase the number of people” but **to build a structure of living, and a system of community care, appropriate to an aged society.**

6.3 The bearer problem, and four answers to it

The single analytical contribution that reframed the Forum was **NAWATA Yoshihiko's** account of the “24-hour citizen.” Japanese community activity has rested historically on people physically present in the neighborhood during the day — the self-employed, full-time homemakers, retirees. Comparing 2006 data with recent data, **all three strata have fallen sharply**; despite advancing aging, fewer people now report themselves as “not employed” than before. The base of the traditional model is contracting **structurally**, not cyclically. Four distinct answers surfaced:

Answer	Where it appeared	What it involves	Open question
Pay for the work	Nabari (<i>Otagai-san</i>); the Suwa model in Iga	Paid volunteering at ¥500/hour; remunerated secretariat staff; community business and fundraising to generate the money	Nawata's own closing question: how far should volunteering carry monetary counter-payment? Not only the ethics, but how care labor is valued
Bank the time	China (time banks); Korea (volunteer points, local point ID); Japan (<i>Fureai Kippu</i> and the Volunteer Labor Bank from the 1970s)	Hours volunteered are recorded as time currency or points, drawn down later for one's own or a family member's support, or exchanged for courses and services	Operation and record-keeping — Wang Yanzhen conceded these remain difficult, and the question from Beijing was precisely what makes such a scheme sustainable
Widen the catchment	Lee Jiatac's report; Japan's <i>kankei jinkō</i> ; Korea's <i>saenghwal ingu</i>	Treat as policy objects those sustaining a continuing relationship with a place without living there — hometown tax donation, second-hometown projects, the Cooperator Squad, workation	Whether a relationship maintained at a distance can carry the load daily presence used to carry
Recognize the residents already there	Iga City (>5,000 foreign residents, ≈6% — twice the national average); Gyeongsangbuk-do's regional visa pilot	Multicultural coexistence as municipal policy; mother-tongue support; disaster-volunteer leader training in which foreign residents participate	Nawata's formulation: will foreign residents become members and bearers of the community , or remain its objects?

How differently the same instrument reads in each country is itself informative. Japan's paid volunteering, Korea's point systems and China's time banks are three attempts on one problem, and none of the three countries had adopted the others' version. That asymmetry — noted explicitly by Professor Nawata — is among the clearest openings for practical cooperation the Forum identified.

6.4 Money, intermediaries, and the two deserts

Who decides how the money is spent

Three fiscal mechanisms were described. **The block grant** (*ikkatsu kōfukin*): Iga and Nabari consolidated purpose-specific subsidies into a single sum whose use the locality determines — introduced in Nabari in April 2003, immediately after residents voted to stay independent. Professor Nawata considers the Japanese version distinctive not for the grant itself, which European cities also use, but for the high proportion of the work the local organization then **carries out itself**. **Community business**: where depopulation is severe, localities are encouraged to earn part of the money through local product development, experience tourism and shopping support — necessary discipline, since a scheme that cannot sustain itself will not last. **Community philanthropy**: the Chinese cases turn on raising charitable money rather than drawing on the government budget — CN¥1.75 million in corporate donations to

repave the *hutong* route to school, donations funding appliance replacement, charitable funds subsidizing canteen meals.

The Chinese formulation of the underlying principle — **public support + self-help + mutual aid**, the third filling the “gaps in living” the first two leave — maps almost exactly onto the Japanese *kōjo* · *jijo* · *kyōjo*. That convergence was noticed in the hall; so was the discomfort one Japanese participant expressed about it.

The connective tissue

If one institution recurred more than any other, it was **the intermediary**: in Japan the **Council of Social Welfare** and its Community Social Workers, whose role Mr. Hirai names *bansō* — accompaniment, running alongside — together with the **local coordinator**, Mr. Tabata's “*node*” tying the person in difficulty to the support they need; in China the **community foundation**, drawing in external resources and drawing out internal capacity. In Korea the equivalent was identified chiefly by its absence: Dr. Cho Deukhwan's diagnosis that the relationship between local government and residents has not matured into self-government, that the sub-municipal posts closest to the field are appointed rather than chosen by residents, and that how government and the private sector can collaborate **as equal partners** remains unresolved.

Japan's national survey data support the emphasis. Asked what they need from a third party, Region Management Organizations put **developing people who take an interest and act (48.8%)** and **planning and delivering multi-actor projects (47.9%)** at the top, followed by **creating spaces for dialogue (42.6%)** and **making local problems visible (41.3%)**. What they least want is help setting themselves up (8.2%) — the need is not for midwifery but for sustained accompaniment.

Medicine and mobility

The most concrete convergence of the Forum came from the Korean side commenting on Japanese material. **CHO In Sook** identified the **medical desert** as the decisive constraint on rural repopulation — and observed that it works *against* the intuitive story about retirement: people say they want to live slowly in the countryside in old age, but the older they get, the closer to a hospital they want to be. She cited France, where *désert médical* is a major social issue and millions have no family doctor within reach. **CHO Deukhwan** identified the parallel **transport desert**: route buses abolished and reduced, older people unable to reach hospitals and shops, the base of daily life threatened. He singled out Iga's example as “*extremely instructive for a great many Korean localities.*”

The Japanese answers were institutional and small-scale: NPO *Yui no Sato*'s free shopping bus, developed from a one-year Council-of-Social-Welfare trial and taken over by two Residents' Self-Government Councils; the **Suwa model** of paid door-to-door transport in a district with an aging rate near 60 percent; and Nabari's *Otagai-san*, where **hospital trips account for 67 percent of all outings supported**. Dr. Cho In Sook's French counterpart — **Médecins Solidaires**, in which young, retired and mid-career doctors each give one week a year to a rural medical center — addresses the same gap from the supply side. Three national vocabularies for one problem, and four institutional attempts at it, may be the most useful comparison the Forum produced.

6.5 Culture as infrastructure

What began as an aside became a substantial thread: **festivals, dance, physical culture and art were repeatedly described not as decoration but as machinery**. CHO In Sook argued that festivals matter “*not merely as tourist events but as devices that create connection between the generations*” — and insisted equally on their economic function, since visitors from cities use local shops and lodgings. WANG Yanzhen described *tai chi* practiced at dawn in parks, often taught free by volunteer instructors, making those spaces sites of health-building **and of exchange** — which he proposed corresponds to Japan's *bon-odori* and radio calisthenics. TABATA Junya described Nabari's “*new community welfare through art*”, organized around the keyword *tokimeki*, the quickening of the heart, as a route by which older people, children and people with disabilities can all participate. And WANG Yanzhen returned to the shared *kanji* culture as the “*root*” of East Asian familiarity, as JIANG Yinyue returned to filial piety and respect for age as “*the soil*” in which volunteering is cultivated.

6.6 What was actually proposed

The operational residue of the two days:

1. **A Japan–China–Korea Public-Benefit Youth Exchange Camp** (WANG Yanzhen), in which young people from the three countries experience community activity together.
2. **Translation and sharing of practical tools** (WANG Yanzhen): community foundation operating manuals, volunteer training handbooks, models for running elderly canteens.
3. **Long-stay youth placements across borders** (FURUSAWA Koyu; endorsed from the floor) — young people living in a community abroad for six months to a year, learning local traditional culture while teaching older residents digital skills.
4. **An East Asian Seniors' Sport and Culture Exchange Meet**, and **community-to-community friendship travel** built on the shared festival calendar (WANG Yanzhen).
5. **Standardization of age-friendly community services** across the region, and **mutual institutional learning between Korea and Japan** on relational population, digital infrastructure and management systems (LEE Jiataec).

The 17th Forum, in Korea on October 29–31, 2026, will take up “**New Roles and Opportunities for Civil Society in the Age of AI.**”

6.7 What was left unresolved

It would misrepresent the meeting to end on the proposals. Four questions were raised and explicitly *not* answered.

1. **Is the direction of policy itself right?** A young Japanese participant asked whether the shared trajectory across all three countries — self-help, mutual aid among residents, and systems to support both — is a direction anyone is genuinely confident in, or one being continued because no alternative is available. The question was acknowledged as important, deferred to the closing comments, and not directly answered.
2. **Why has fertility fallen this far?** Professor Nawata's own self-criticism: policies and slogans have been produced in quantity, but “*the young people who matter are not really trusting us.*” His suggestion — that adults, and older men in particular, may have built the very conditions under which a person feels they do not want to raise a child in this society — was offered as something requiring severe self-examination before the subject can be discussed at all.
3. **Are we excluding the young without noticing?** From the same speaker, drawing on his Machida City research: the complaint that young people do not participate may describe a structure adults have themselves built.
4. **How far should volunteering be paid?** Japan discussed paid volunteering; China described point systems and time banks; Korea said little about payment at all. Professor Nawata identified the underlying question as **how local mutual support can be made sustainable in an aging society, and how the value of care labor is to be evaluated.** There was no time to enter it.

To these the editors would add a fifth, implicit in both Korean interventions: **the cases presented at a forum like this one are, necessarily, the successes.** Both Dr. Cho In Sook and Dr. Cho Deukhwan said so plainly — that policies exist but do not reach every locality and generation; that however good a measure is, those who receive its benefit are a portion of the whole; and that what is needed is a place where people can talk with their guard down about what is *not* working. That the two most skeptical interventions of the day came from the Korean delegation, about their own material as much as anyone's, is perhaps the best evidence that such a place is being built.

Regionality differs, national character differs, historical background differs — and people carrying all those differences gather in the same place, exchange views frankly, and seek out the path of cooperation. That process is itself the very form of an East Asian civil society. — XU Xiaoxiao, CANGO

Appendices

Appendix A — Executive Committee (Japan)

As listed in the original report, in Japanese syllabary order. Titles as given at the time of the Forum.

#	Name	Affiliation
1	AOO Ken	Advisor, Japan Foundation Center (public interest incorporated foundation)
2	AMEMIYA Takako	President and CEO, Japan Association of Charitable Organizations (JACO)
3	IINO Yuji	Vice Chair of the Committee. Representative Director, NPO Akame no Satoyama wo Sodateru Kai; Director, Japan International Volunteer Research Institute (JIVRI)
4	ITO Michio	Chief Advisor, NPO Asia Community Center 21
5	KURIBAYASHI Chieko	President, Toshima Children's WAKUWAKU Network (certified NPO)
6	SHIRAIISHI Yoshiharu	Director, Department of Research, JACO; President, Japan International Volunteer Research Institute (JIVRI)
7	SUZUKI Yukio	Director, Shiretoko Nature University Founding Foundation
8	TADA Masahiro	Advisor, Department of Research, JACO
9	NAGANUMA Yoshiyuki	Executive Director, JACO
10	BANG Jina	NPO Osaka Network for Employment Support of People with Mental Disabilities, JSN Tokyo / JSN Research Institute; Director, JIVRI
11	FUJII Mamoru	Former specialist in welfare for older people and people with disabilities
12	FURUSAWA Koyu	Chair of the Committee. Visiting Professor, Research and Development Initiative, Kokugakuin University

Advisors

#	Name	Affiliation
13	YAMAOKA Yoshinori	Chair, Civil Society Initiative Fund (NPO); Chair, Japan Foundation Center; Director, JIVRI
14	PIAO Meihua	Secretary General, East Asia Environmental Information Express Messenger

Appendix B — Glossary

Terms in Japanese, Korean and Chinese that recur in this report, with the English rendering used here.

Japanese

Term	English rendering and note
<i>jichikai / chōnaikai</i> 自治会・町内会	Neighborhood association — distinctively Japanese voluntary territorial bodies filling the gap between household and municipality; weakening since about the 1980s
<i>jūmin jichi kyōgikai</i> 住民自治協議会	Residents' Self-Government Council — Iga City's body at elementary-school-district scale, open to neighborhood associations, NPOs, volunteer and welfare groups; 38 in the city
<i>chiiki-zukuri soshiki</i> 地域づくり組織	Community-building organization — Nabari City's equivalent, constituted under ordinance; 15 across the city
<i>toshinai bunken / chiiki-nai bunken</i> 都市内分権・地域内分権	Decentralization within the city / within the locality — giving local communities defined powers on a statutory footing

Term	English rendering and note
<i>ikkatsu kōfukin</i> 一括交付金	Block grant — a single non-earmarked sum allocated to a community body, which sets its own priorities
<i>jichi kihon jōrei</i> 自治基本条例	Basic Ordinance on Self-Government — a municipality's supreme normative instrument
<i>chiiki jichiku seido</i> 地域自治区制度	Local Self-Government District system — created by the 2004 amendment of the Local Autonomy Act; little used, as it must apply to a whole municipality
RMO 地域運営組織	Region Management Organization — resident-led body implementing measures under its own management policy; 8,193 across 893 municipalities (FY2024)
<i>kyōdō</i> 協働	Collaboration between administration and citizens; close to co-production in Ostrom's sense
<i>jijo</i> · <i>kyōjo</i> · <i>kōjo</i> 自助 · 共助 · 公助	Self-help, mutual aid, public assistance — the standard triad of Japanese welfare and disaster policy
<i>shakyō</i> 社協	Council of Social Welfare — municipal and prefectural social welfare corporation; the principal intermediary support organization
<i>bansō</i> 伴走	Accompaniment , literally “running alongside” — HIRAI Shunkei's term for the intermediary's proper role
<i>chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai</i> 地域おこし協力隊	Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad — national scheme deploying young urban people to rural areas since 2009
<i>kankei jinkō</i> 関係人口	Relational population — those maintaining a continuing relationship with a locality without residing there; formalized in the 2014 Regional Revitalization Strategy
<i>furusato nōzei</i> ふるさと納税	Hometown tax donation — directing part of one's local tax to a chosen municipality
<i>minsei-iin</i> 民生委員	Volunteer welfare commissioner — the locally appointed first point of contact on welfare matters
<i>otagai-sama</i> お互いさま	“We're all in it together” — the reciprocity norm, and the name of Nabari's mutual-support scheme <i>Otagai-san</i>
<i>fureai kippu</i> ふれあい切符	“Caring-relationship tickets” — Japanese time-currency scheme dating from the 1970s, alongside the Volunteer Labor Bank
<i>tokimeki</i> ときめき	The quickening of the heart — the organizing keyword of Nabari's art-and-welfare project
<i>bon-odori</i> / <i>ondo</i> 盆踊り · 音頭	Bon dance / its sung refrain — cited as a core of local activity

Korean

Term	English rendering and note
<i>jibang somyeol</i> 지방소멸	Local extinction — the Korean rendering of the Japanese <i>chihō shōmetsu</i> , introduced from 2014
Population-decline areas 인구감소지역	89 areas designated nationally in 2021, triggering support through the Local Extinction Response Fund
<i>saenghwal ingu</i> 생활인구	Living population — introduced 2022; covers commuters, tourists, consumers and students as well as residents
<i>gohyang sarang gibu</i> 고향사랑기부	Hometown love donation — in force from 2023; counterpart of Japan's hometown tax donation
<i>jeochulsaeng haengbok gusang</i> 저출생 행복구상	Happiness Concept for Low Birth Rates — Gyeongsangbuk-do's program: 30 key tasks across six fields
<i>Ai Cheonguk</i> 아이천국	“Child Heaven” — the flagship community child-rearing model; seven municipalities 2026–29

Term	English rendering and note
<i>dong / eup / myeon</i> 동 · 읍 · 면	Sub-municipal administrative units , whose heads are currently appointed rather than elected
VMS	Volunteer Management System — used by some Korean local authorities and NPOs to record volunteer time
<i>Chuseok</i> 추석 · <i>Hahoe Mask Dance</i> 하회 별신굿탈놀이	The autumn harvest festival, and the masked dance drama of Andong — both cited as intergenerational cultural infrastructure

Chinese

Term	English rendering and note
<i>gongzhu · zizhu · huzhu</i> 公助 · 自助 · 互助	Public support, self-help, mutual aid — closely parallel to the Japanese <i>kōjo · jijo · kyōjo</i>
15-minute living circle 十五分钟生活圈	Reorganizing cities so that shopping, medicine, meals, elderly services and child-rearing are within a fifteen-minute walk; three-year action plan issued 2023
Embedded services 嵌入型服务	Inserting small-scale care, child-rearing and meal support into existing housing estates rather than building on the periphery
Complete community 完整社区	A community equipped with the full range of services its residents need
Time bank 时间银行	Volunteer hours recorded as <i>time currency</i> and drawn down when the volunteer later needs support
The three armies 三军共进	The staffing strategy: the <i>regular army</i> (trained professionals), the <i>allied army</i> (multi-professional teams) and the <i>volunteer army</i> (volunteers and time banks)
Silver economy 银发经济	The economy of goods and services for older people; State Council General Office opinion, January 2024
<i>hukou</i> 户口	Household registration — the mismatch between registered and actual residence (492 million people) shapes how Chinese aging is distributed
<i>datong</i> 大同 · <i>xiao / ren</i> 孝 · 仁	The Great Unity; filial piety / benevolence — the classical values repeatedly invoked as the ground of mutual aid
里仁為美	“It is the neighborly relation that is most beautiful” — the phrase with which WANG Yanzhen closed his report
<i>hutong / siheyuan</i> 胡同 · 四合院	Alley / courtyard house — the built fabric of the Chaoyangmen district of Beijing

Appendix C — Organizations and Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full name
JACO	Japan Association of Charitable Organizations (公益財団法人 公益法人協会) — host of the Forum and publisher of the original report
CANGO	China Association for NGO Cooperation (中国国際民間組織協力促進会) — Chinese co-hosting body
KFV	Korea Forum of Volunteerism (한국자원봉사포럼) — Korean co-hosting body
JIVRI	Japan International Volunteer Research Institute (ボランティア活動国際研究会)
RMO	Region Management Organization (地域運営組織)
BID	Business Improvement District
KOSTAT	Statistics Korea (한국통계청)

Abbreviation	Full name
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy (of the European Union)
VMS	Volunteer Management System
TFR	Total fertility rate
TNR	Trap–Neuter–Return, the standard humane approach to stray-cat populations

Appendix D — The Original Report and the Video Record

The original report

Title	第 16 回東アジア市民社会フォーラム「人口減少社会における持続可能な地域コミュニティの形成 — 新たな担い手と多様な連携が拓く地域の未来 —」報告書
English title	The 16th East Asia Civil Society Forum: “Building Sustainable Local Communities in a Society of Population Decline — New Actors and Diverse Partnerships Opening the Future of Our Regions.” Proceedings
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Grant	The Uehiro Foundation on Ethics and Education
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The publisher's own note records that the report was transcribed from the video record of the Forum; it therefore reads as spoken language, with some passages rendered into written style, and passages where the recording was unclear have been omitted. The same qualification applies, at one further remove, to this English edition.

Video record

The proceedings were filmed and are available online:

Version	Link
Full record	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6nobOV17OE
Digest version	https://youtu.be/3knxPH6Up6U