

**RESEARCH ON  
THE AGED SOCIETY WITH  
A DECLINING BIRTHRATE  
AND  
A SOCIETY OF  
A COOPERATIVE WAY OF LIFE**

**(INTERIM REPORT)**

**SUMMARY**

**June 2009**

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Research Committee on  
Aged Society with Declining Birthrate  
and  
Society of Cooperative Way of Life  
House of Councillors

Japan

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## I. Process of the Committee's Research

The House of Councillors Research Committee on Aged Society with Declining Birthrate and Society of Cooperative Way of Life was established on October 5, 2007, during the 168th session of the Diet to undertake a long-term, comprehensive study on Japan's falling birthrate and aged society, and on building an integrated society.

Deliberations at directors' meetings held subsequent to the establishment of the Committee resulted in the selection of "restoring and strengthening communities" as the Committee's central research theme.

In the first year of the study, the Committee engaged in wide-ranging discussion on restoring and strengthening communities. It also conducted a study specifically on coexistence with foreigners in the community, concerning which an interim report was completed on June 4, 2008, and submitted to the president of the House of Councillors.

In the second year of the study, deliberations at directors' meetings produced the decision to conduct a study on restoring and strengthening local communities.

During the 171st ordinary Diet session, on February 18, 2009, the Committee invited three voluntary testifiers to give their views on the current status of local communities and efforts being made by these: Kosuke Motani from the Development Bank of Japan Inc.; Shigeki Shimada, mayor of Sakae Village, Nagano Prefecture; and Tatsuo Gonda, president of Ogawa-no-sho Inc., a Nagano-based manufacturer of *oyaki* (stuffed buns) and other processed foods. On February 25, views were invited from three further voluntary testifiers on community issues in urban environments: Professor Masako Kawakami, College of Integrated Human and Social Welfare Studies at Shukutoku University; Hisashi Katayama, who engages in local medical care as the president of the Onomichi Medical Association; and Takashi Motoyama, director of the non-profit organization Fukushitei, which operates in Tama New Town. On April 8, the Committee requested the views of four voluntary testifiers on local community stimulation and economic independence: Professor Terutaka Suzuki, Department of Life

Design, College of Sociology at Edogawa University; Tomio Yuki, general producer for the Naruko-no-Kome (Naruko Rice) Project; Kazuko Ishigaki, vice-chair of the Cheerful Mother Shop Partnership, which sells agricultural produce in Akita Prefecture; and Izumi Kuwano, chair of the Yufuin Hot Spring Tourism Association. Each of these sessions was followed by questions from the Committee.

The Committee also dispatched members to Shiga Prefecture on February 23–24, 2009, to conduct a fact-finding survey on the aged society with a declining birthrate, and on a cooperative way of life.

On April 15, 2009, Committee members engaged in free discussion toward compilation of an interim report.

Further deliberations at directors' meetings based on the above produced a summary of immediate challenges in rebuilding local communities as one dimension of the “restoring and strengthening communities” theme. Eighteen recommendations were drawn up under four headings.

## **II: Proposals on Restoring and Strengthening Local Communities**

Japan's population is aging rapidly, accompanied by an equally rapid birthrate decline. The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research estimates that by 2035, 90 percent or more of towns and villages will have seen their populations shrink below 2005 levels, with those experiencing a decline of at least 20 percent in particular expected to account for 60 percent or more of the total. Towns and villages with aging rates of 40 percent or more will climb to at least 40 percent, threatening an increase in so-called "marginal municipalities" where it is difficult to sustain community functions such as local autonomy and ceremonial occasions.

The decline in local community dynamism is becoming marked in depopulated areas, and it is also expected to become serious across Japan, including in cities. As society ages and populations decline, mutual and joint assistance in local communities will take on a growing importance. While acting to revitalize local communities is a long-term challenge that will not see immediate results, it is simultaneously a pressing issue requiring immediate steps to be taken from those areas amenable to action. As rural areas have long experience in dealing with aging and declining populations, cities need to learn from their good practices. In addition, because local community problems stem from the falling number of young people, it will also be important to push ahead harder with measures to redress falling birthrates.

Taking "restoring and strengthening communities" as its theme, the Committee on Aged Society with Declining Birthrate and Society of Cooperative Way of Life has spent its second year assiduously studying ways to revitalize local communities. Restoring and strengthening local communities poses a wide range of challenges, while there are also various possible approaches. In different regions too, rural and urban circumstances differ, while even from the perspective of areas such as medical care and welfare, community business, and mutual local assistance, a number of issues present themselves. In its voluntary testimony sessions, the Committee engaged in broad-ranging discussion on the current status of local communities and efforts being made by these, community issues in

urban environments, and community stimulation and economic independence, working to identify key challenges.

Based on these efforts, the recommendations of our Committee on immediate challenges are as follows. We call on the Japanese government as well as local public bodies, companies, and various other organizations to grasp the purport of our recommendations and to work toward their realization.

## **A. General Discussion**

### **1. Respecting local diversity**

In restoring and strengthening local communities, attention must be paid to the diversity of local communities when it comes to climate, history, traditional culture, and lifestyles. While the Great Heisei Merger may have created wide-ranging municipalities, local community-building policies need to be developed that address the particular challenges of each community unit. In doing so, local residents and local authorities need to work together and make use of local resources, as seen in the example of Sakae Village in Nagano Prefecture with its paddy reform (land readjustment of terraced rice paddies to allow mechanization), road reform (road improvement directly managed by the village), and the “geta-baki helper” system (where local residents register as helpers to make nursing care available 24 hours a day).

### **2. Urban-rural linkage**

In rural areas, dealing with the shortage of hands in farming, mountain, and fishing villages that are experiencing ongoing population aging and decline will require the active development of linkage and exchange with cities and the introduction of external human resources. More exchange with cities and stronger urban-rural links should also remind downstream cities of the contribution of hilly and mountainous areas in terms of water resource conservation and the environment, as well as provide city-dwellers with the experience of living in rural villages and working on the land.

### **3. Securing local financial resources**

One reason that it is becoming difficult to maintain local communities is a

fiscal crisis that is shrinking the public services that underpin the lives of local residents. Stable financial resources need to be secured for local communities so that they can promote the welfare of local residents, fulfilling the traditional mission and role of local public bodies.

## **B. Medical Care and Welfare, Etc.**

### **1. Enhancing medical care systems**

Securing proper medical care is a basic condition for community life, but because of a lack of financial resources and shortages in doctors and nurses at public hospitals, local areas in particular are experiencing a growing number of hospital and ward closures. The necessary local medical care system needs to be established to protect residents' health, including reevaluating the functions and roles of public hospitals and working to sustain these. In addition, pediatric care needs to be further improved to stem the ongoing birthrate decline.

### **2. Inter-occupational collaboration in medical and nursing care**

There are some communities where patients, their families, attending doctors, nurses, and care managers, etc., work closely together, with hospital admittance, rehabilitation, and in-home treatment and nursing care all linked seamlessly. The same kind of framework needs to be set up in other communities for the comprehensive provision of medical and nursing care. To promote in-home medical care, collaboration needs to be developed between private practice doctors and acute hospitals, and steps should also be taken to reduce the burden placed on hospital physicians. At the same time, consideration needs to be given to gearing medical fees to a medical system premised on inter-occupational collaboration.

### **3. Living support for the elderly**

For nursing care to be further socialized and the elderly to become more independent, community general support centers need to be able to understand and support the living situations of the elderly in communities. This will include further enhancement of the long-term care insurance system. The functions and human resources of these centers should be expanded and strengthened and more cooperation established with local

public bodies, ensuring that the elderly do not become isolated in their communities.

#### 4. Attention to housing for the elderly

Housing plays a major role in independence for the elderly, with the rent paid by those elderly people living in rental housing imposing a heavy burden on their finances. More public rental housing needs to be supplied and rent assistance bolstered. Housing that is tailored to the needs of the elderly integrating accommodation and nursing services should also be developed, while more work needs to be put into barrier-free housing.

#### 5. Developing conditions to enable the elderly to engage with work

Opening up a diverse range of lifestyle options for the elderly will allow them to contribute to society, provide them with a reason for living, and improve their health. Securing job opportunities for the elderly is an important issue not just in rural areas but also in metropolitan areas where the number of elderly people is rising rapidly, and conditions need to be established that will allow the elderly to engage with work.

### **C. Economic Independence**

#### 1. Use of local resources

To restore and strengthen local communities, it will be important to make full use of the human resources, industries, and various types of resources in these communities, encourage the development of local virtuous economic circles, and ensure the economic independence of communities. This in turn will enable local residents to continue living in their communities and firmly establish young people there too. As the nursing and welfare sectors should have an economic effect on local communities, welfare-related industries need to be boosted.

#### 2. Developing local brands and community business

At present, many areas where new populations are moving in are those that have local brands that can only be produced by that particular area and that are underpinned by the local lifestyle and culture. This idea of brand differentiation through “local design”, which is one method of boosting the

quality of the various cultural resources latent in the community, needs to be introduced into community-building. “Community business”, whereby the various local community resources that have previously been dormant are utilized for resident-driven problem-solving, which is then developed into business, needs to be fostered and “local brands”—brands that make the most of unique local characteristics—established. To develop these products and lock in production and distribution, urgent steps need to be taken to support business development that goes beyond the bounds of geographical conditions and local society, and to develop human resources through, for example, experience exchanges.

### 3. Expansion of “local production for local consumption” movements

“Local production for local consumption” movements have major potential as a means of ensuring the economic viability of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries while also contributing to food safety, and as such need to be more publicly recognized and advertised. Food mileage as an index of food travel distance and volume should be highlighted, and buying behavior on the part of local consumers that supports local production for local consumption encouraged. Using locally-produced food in school lunches is important also from an education perspective, and should be further promoted.

### 4. Economic independence for farm women

Economic independence gained by farm women through, for example, setting up their own businesses, expands the chances for women to participate in society and is also effective in boosting farming household income. However, there are cases where factors such as a lack of understanding in the surrounding community, inadequate initial capital, and aging among business members obstruct smooth business operation. The central government and local public bodies need to publicly recognize promising businesses. In addition, assistance should be enhanced through various types of financing, business start-up training, and model projects, while prefectural governments should employ more female extension instructors as mentors.

### 5. Securing new farm hands

Japan has been experiencing a swift decline in the number of people

working in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, while those remaining are rapidly aging. Given that this segment of the population produces our food, more attention needs to be paid to small-scale family-run farms and new farm hands secured. To this end, society needs to recognize the work of women farmers, who in turn need to advertise the appeal of farming. To ensure that the voices of the many women employed in the agricultural sector are heard by agricultural authorities, the ratio of women directors needs to be expanded in agricultural cooperatives and other agricultural groups. It will also be important to establish the conditions to firmly root young people in agriculture.

#### 6. Further promotion of tourism

There are fears that the expected rural population decline will shrink local economies. Expanding tourism could be a way of compensating for the drop in consumption that will accompany population decline. The conditions therefore need to be set in place for boosting tourism, such as encouraging people to take their paid holidays. Local communities also need to make appropriate efforts to attract tourism, such as protecting their local scenery and organizing various types of events, recognizing that towns that are comfortable to live in make the best tourist spots.

### **D. Mutual Aid and Assistance**

#### 1. Restoring and strengthening community ties

In cities and other communities, local ties are weakening, as exemplified by waning neighborhood relationships. The spirit of local autonomy, whereby locals help each other out, needs to be restored. Participation, discussion, and thought by local residents will be critical in achieving this, and venues need to be developed and provided for local gatherings. In so-called “old new towns,” newly developed housing areas that have become run down, support such as building safety nets for elderly people living alone needs to be provided.

#### 2. Emphasizing work-life balance

Revitalizing local communities will require the participation of people of all ages in local activities based on the concept of work-life balance. In

particular, because those who have retired from active employment tend not to participate in local community activities, there needs to be a greater emphasis on both working and being involved in local activities from the time when people are still in the workforce. Companies too need to take measures to support local activities by their employees from the perspective of coexistence with society.

### 3. Developing leaders and securing human resources

NPOs and other groups engaged in building communities and dealing with the aging of society often rely heavily on efforts by individuals, while they also tend to be unprofitable. This makes fostering leaders and securing human resources a key challenge. Systems must be made to allow anyone who wants to make a social contribution to do so, including those who live outside the community, and funds need to be secured to compensate talented personnel. In addition, the government and local public bodies should provide support for training human resources.

### 4. Special capital consideration for NPOs, etc.

Many NPOs and similar organizations do not have adequate financial foundations. Because their financial constraints pose a major obstacle to their sustainability, in addition to government support, mechanisms need to be set in place for effectively channeling private-sector capital into community-building.

## Appendix

### List of Members of Research Committee on Aged Society with Declining Birthrate and Society of Cooperative Way of Life

*Chairperson* Masami Tanabu (DP-SR-PN-N)

*Directors* Kumiko Aihara (DP-SR-PN-N)

Atsuko Shimoda (DP-SR-PN-N)

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Tamayo Marukawa (LDP)

Hiroyuki Yoshiie (LDP)

Tomoko Ukishima (NK)

Tomoko Kami (JCP)

Mizuho Fukushima (SDP)

Shimpei Matsushita (JRP)

Note:

DP-SR-PN-N The Democratic Party, The Shin-Ryokufukai, The People's New Party and The Nippon

LDP Liberal Democratic Party

NK	New Komeito
JCP	Japanese Communist Party
SDP	Social Democratic Party
JRP	Japan Renaissance Party

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