

# Regional Revitalization Paves the Way for the Future of Japan

JAPAN is currently working on regional revitalization nationwide. We asked Akiko Ito, Director General, Secretariat of the Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan, Cabinet Secretariat about the purpose of regional revitalization, what has been accomplished so far and the challenges faced, and what lies ahead.

## **The Japanese government has positioned regional revitalization as a key policy. Why does Japan need regional revitalization?**


The provisional calculations released by the private sector think tank Japan Policy Council in 2014 shocked the public. According to these provisional calculations, if the trend of excessive concentration of the population in the Tokyo area continues, by 2040 the population of women in their 20s and 30s in approximately half the total of municipalities will decline by 50% or more, with many of those municipalities facing the risk of disappearing in the future. Japan's population peaked in 2008, with rural areas in particular experiencing a decline in the number of births and a sharp decrease in population. Overcrowding in Tokyo and surrounding areas and rural depopulation will have serious consequences for Japan's society and economy. Regional revitalization is necessary to halt the decline in population and redress an excessive concentration of population in the Tokyo area. Regional revitalization will help maintain the vitality of Japan as a whole.

## **What targets has the government set?**

In 2014, the government established the Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in accordance with the Act for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy. Looking ahead to 2060, as the Long-Term Vision it is expected that a population of around 100 million people (the current population is about 120 million) will be maintained in 2060 if the total fertility rate rises to a certain level and the Comprehensive Strategy that set forth the policy objectives and measures for five years from FY2015 has declared the four basic objectives of "Generate stable employment in regional areas," "Create a new inflow of people to regional areas," "Fulfill the hopes of the young generation for marriage, childbirth, and parenthood," and "Create regional areas suited to the times, preserve safe and secure living, and promote cooperation between regions."

## **The current fiscal year is the final year of the first stage of the Comprehensive Strategy. What kinds of changes are occurring in rural areas?**

Sensing the impending crisis of population decline, local governments, various companies, NPOs, and other organizations are stepping up their efforts for regional development. For example, Nishiawakura Village in Okayama Prefecture is supporting venture companies that make use of the area's plentiful forest resources, leading to job creation and an increase in migrant workers. Wajima City in Ishikawa Prefecture is renovating unoccupied houses in central areas to create facilities for the elderly and child care and support



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for the disabled, creating a town full of life and energy where everyone from its oldest to its youngest citizens can interact in their local community. Successful cases of regional revitalization have often been the result of people outside a particular region discovering an appeal that the local residents had failed to notice, and carrying out activities that harnessed that appeal.

On the other hand, the fact that population influx into the Tokyo area has not been checked is a serious issue. In particular, there is a large population outflow from the major regional cities to the metropolitan area. Even though the local economy is in good condition, many young people move to the Tokyo area because of the lack of preferred jobs in the regions.

**The second stage of the Comprehensive Strategy will be formulated at the end of this year. Going forward, what will be important points for regional revitalization?**

I think Japan still has enough potential for growth. One of the things needed for growth is diversity. Japan is home to a variety of environments, including major cities like Tokyo, remote islands and mountainous areas. It is important to create a society where people with different backgrounds

and values can harness their abilities. An increasing number of children born in Tokyo and the surrounding area know almost nothing of rural areas. By promoting the exchange of people between regional and urban areas and the movement of people into the regions, we can expect to generate fresh innovation. It is important, too, to form “mixed” communities where everyone from young people to the elderly play an active role and support each other.

Further, Japan is now aiming to realize “Society 5.0,” where social challenges can be resolved in tandem with economic development by utilizing IoT, AI and other modern technologies. The local regions are precisely where these social challenges are to be found, and where great potential exists to generate new industries to resolve those challenges. It is also necessary to develop the human resources required to achieve this locally.

Other Asian countries too are experiencing increasingly declining birthrates and aging populations. I hope that those countries can refer to the initiatives implemented by Japan, which is confronting such challenges earlier. ▮

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