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**Civic Engagement Patterns in Shrinking Cities: Rural and Urban Japan**

by

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**Extended Abstract:**

Among scholars, policymakers, and institutions, civic engagement is a concept that has enjoyed ever-increasing popularity since the revival of Tocquevillean ideas in the last decades of the twentieth century and the success of Putnam's work on social capital (Berger, 2009). Despite that, few authors attempted to develop theories fitting Asian countries and Japanese specificities, focusing instead on describing local features and comparing them with theories and civil society landscapes typical of the West (Ogawa, 2017; Edwards, 2011). That led to biased views on Japanese civil society often associated with a tradition of low engagement and weakness (Haddad, 2007). Authors like Kage (2010), Haddad (2006, 2007) and Tsujinaka (2002, 2003, 2008, 2010) systematically contributed to change the view on Japanese civil society, exposing the existing biases in the approach, showing the unique strength of Japanese engagement and the features it shared with other countries' equals.

Retrospectively, their contribution indeed falls within the view of a more cosmopolitan approach to the study of Japan, a methodology that separates itself from methodological nationalism and links the country and its distinguishing features into global discourses (Ogawa and Seaton, 2020). Within this framework, the study of Japan and its communities, migration, and demographic change have much to offer to border-crossing discussions (Ogawa and Seaton, 2020; McElwain, 2020; Jones and Seitani, 2019).

Within the international discourse on ageing, Japan is indeed a source of valuable insights whose mindful observation can provide empirical evidence on how to effectively cope with the demographic change's economic, social, and health-related consequences. That is equally true for urban shrinkage, identified in Japan as a specific consequence of ageing and falling fertility rates (Hattori et al., 2017; Buhnik, 2010). Whereas the national depopulation trend became nationally evident after the first decade of the 2000s (Statistic Bureau, 2020) and started to affect an increasing number of Japanese cities only recently, a significant number of rural prefectures and municipalities had been facing the issue of shrinkage already since the 1950s (Buhnik, 2010; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2015). Japanese cities are thus considered to be familiar with the exploration and implementation of policies adapted to ageing and shrinking situations (Flüchter, 2009; Ducom, 2008; Snee, 2020).

Policymaking in shrinking cities is often approached by analysing primarily urban areas and proposing inclusive approaches or solutions, overlooking the relevance for policy success of the affected places' particularities (Turok 2004; Haase et al. 2014). Thus, a shift to a more

comprehensive approach to shrinkage, defining the interrelation of the different shrinkage dimensions and how shrinkage affects everyday life, is necessary (Döringer et al., 2019; Bernt, 2016). This study provided an inclusive, multi-dimensional, and innovative approach to shrinking cities, investigating patterns in civic engagement in different shrinking contexts. That, consecutively, opens multiple possibilities to expand the theoretical knowledge on shrinkage and its effects on urban life beyond the Japanese case alone.

Building on Haddad's (2007) theory of volunteer participation and the idea that volunteering relates to norms of civic responsibility shaped by local practices, ideas of responsibility, and local context, this project went forward to link it to the field of urban shrinkage. More generally, while the international discourse often includes economic features into the defining features of shrinkage (Döringer et al., 2019; Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015), this study embraces shrinkage's primarily demographic features by differentiating between shrinking and growing cities based on their local population variations between 2016 and 2020. Nonetheless, it also moves away from the typical pattern characterising Japanese studies on shrinking cities. First, by studying a diversified sample of 13 densely populated municipalities (Atsugi, Ina, Kasama, Mito, Miyako, Morioka, Nerima, Nobeoka, Shibata, Suginami, Takamatsu, Takayama, Tsukuba) belonging to differently urbanised prefectures, it withdrew from the typically Japanese focus on small-to-medium rural municipalities (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2015) and incorporated more aspects of the urbanisation spectrum. Using the OECD's (2016) standard measurement for regional urbanisation contexts, municipalities' locations were categorised as either rural or urban areas. This categorisation approach identified four shrinking cities located in rural regions, six shrinking urban cities, and three growing municipalities. Lastly, by focusing on the variation in civic engagement in different shrinking contexts, the study detached from the tendency of Japanese case studies to address urban decay and housing vacancy or renewal as the main consequence of shrinkage (Döringer et al., 2019), introducing a still underrepresented social perspective.

An extensive literature review on theories and significant works on civic engagement and urban shrinkage was used to formulate three hypotheses. The first introduced the prospect of rural shrinking cities as more fundamentally involved in the local governance through their engagement in a broader set of activities. Then, the second one dealt explicitly with community participation, expecting shrinking cities in rural contexts to present higher overall involvement in the community and membership rates to local associations. Finally, one last postulation generally addressed the differences between shrinking cities in diverse urbanisation contexts, suggesting that their patterns would differ in scope and citizen participation.

For this investigation to effectively test these three premises and answer the research question inquiring how civic engagement patterns differ in shrinking cities located in urban and rural contexts, the analysis focused on the mixed dataset deriving from six questions from the J-JIGS4-NHA survey of 2017 (see Tsujinaka, 2020) integrated with information obtained from documents disclosed by the 13 participating municipalities. Drawing inspiration from Pekkanen et al.'s (2014) approach to the analysis of the survey, these data allowed investigating local tendencies for participation in activities and membership to Japanese *jichikai* (neighbourhood associations, hereafter NHA), the range of initiatives these associations offered, their relevance for the community, and the financial resources directed to their end. The considered survey questions provided mixed categorical data, then subjected to a three-phased quantitative analysis.

The municipalities participating in the survey represent the various conurbation sizes and demographic situations detectable throughout Japan and provide a geographically spread sample of most conurbations types identified by the Japanese law (Government of Japan, Act No. 67 of 1947) and of the possible combinations of demographic and urbanisation contexts. Hence, a discrete degree of generalisation of the outcomes provided by examining engagement features in these areas is feasible. Nonetheless, a larger sampling, including rare phenomena like growing cities in rural prefectures, or other conurbations like smaller hamlets and government ordinance cities, could convey more exhaustive information and present new shades to the spectrum of civic engagement patterns provided by this examination. As such, this aspect must be considered for further debates and researches on engagement in Japanese cities.

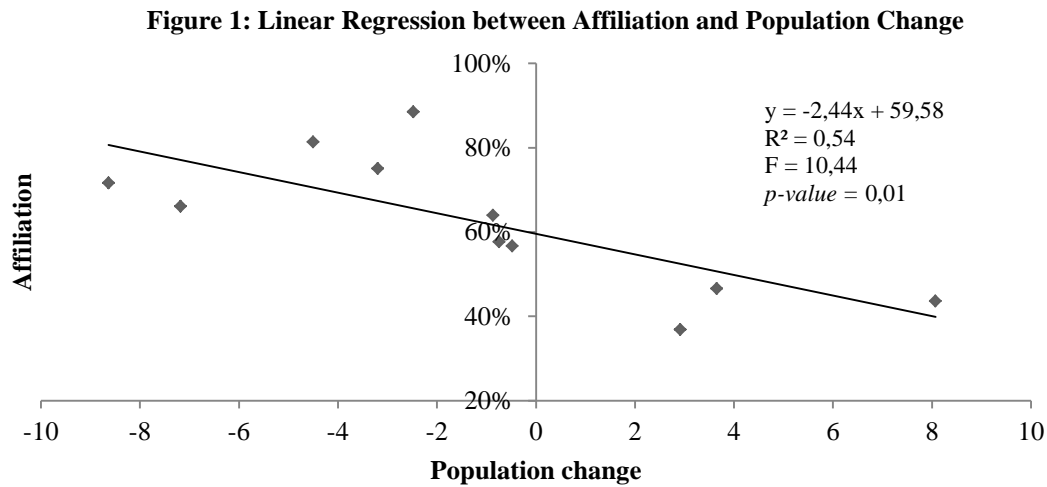
After introducing the isolated municipal data, whose scrutiny facilitates identifying standard features among most Japanese neighbourhood groups, the first analytical phase focused on categorising municipalities based on their urbanisation contexts alone. Following that, the second comparison revolved around demographic features, differentiating exclusively between shrinking and growing municipalities. Then, the fundamental analysis of shrinking cities in urban or rural contexts came about as a final point. While this separation throughout the analytical section was instrumental in isolating relevant patterns and specifying which might be representative for a certain context, it was insufficient to address causality and affirm that a particular trend is generated by context or shrinkage alone. Further research based on temporal data clearly addressing the changes in patterns throughout the various stages of depopulation progress is required to define this aspect.

Among the analytical process's secondary results was the confirmation of some identifying aspects of *jichikai*, which emerged as constant regardless of the degree of demographic change or the variation in the urbanisation levels. This type of association tends to be primarily involved in maintaining the local area, relying on the substantial participation of the residents in these kinds of deeds. Furthermore, festivals and *matsuri*, whose role in creating a feeling of belonging to the community, enjoy large relevance among residents and help associations in their role of social capital creators (Pekkanen et al., 2014). Nonetheless, apart from these similarities, the primary outcome emerging from the analysis was the recognition of contextual differences in civic engagement patterns.

Starting from the overview of the first analytical stage, one of the main takeaways was that Applbaum's (1996) idea advocating for the consideration of participation and membership as two different aspects of associative participation found confirmation. Despite rural areas presenting, as expected, higher membership rates, it was in urban prefectures that participation in activities gave the impression to be typically more established. Per contra, in terms of activities' undertaking and funding, the data established rural areas' neat preference for activities coping with welfare and educational issues such as elderly care and cooperation with academic institutions. This tendency falls partially in line with civil society organisations' increasing involvement in providing preventive care services that the latest reform of the long-term care system called for (Tsutsui, 2014; Morikawa, 2014). Furthermore, the progressively ageing population and the outgoing migration experienced by rural areas for decades (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2015) might be responsible for the changing needs of these communities, resulting in adjustments in the local civil society's scope and direction.

The analytical phase observing the differences between depopulating and expanding municipalities offered more detailed insights on how the local milieu and, singularly, shrinkage can

influence NHAs' membership rates. More specifically, municipal membership rates to NHAs appeared to positively correlate with population loss (see Figure 1).



(Source: Atsugi City NHAs Federation, 2019; Atsugi City, 2021a, 2021b; Ina City, 2019, 2021a, 2021b; Mito City, 2015, 2021; Miyako City, 2016, 2020, 2021; Morioka City, 2015, 2021; Nerima City, 2018, 2019, 2021; Nobeoka City, 2020, 2021; Suginami City, 2016, 2019, 2021; Takamatsu City, 2018a, 2018b, 2021; Takayama City, 2020, 2021; Tsukuba City, 2018, 2021; Tsukuba City NHA Federation, 2020; own computation)

Furthermore, the residents' level of engagement reported by the associations responding to the survey showed people's higher activeness in the community within shrinking contexts. However, the data did not significantly differ in shrinking and growing municipalities' participative patterns when considering the average participation in activities. Instead, differences emerged in the type of activities organised by these opposingly developing classes of cities (see Figure 2). Like in rural contexts, in situations of shrinkage, activities of elderly support were widely diffuse. Conversely, expanding cities' NHAs tended to organise a smaller array of activities, engaging more often in firefighting and ceremonial occasions.

**Figure 2: Overview of organisation rates in different contexts**

Activities	Categories		
	Shr. Rural	Shr. Urban	Growing
Cleaning	87,8%	89,9%	79,9%
Festivals	70,2%	75,9%	58,0%
Garbage disposal	72,5%	64,4%	62,6%
Disaster prevention	65,8%	65,9%	41,7%
Elderly support	81,1%	68,3%	41,7%
Street management	88,0%	83,3%	64,8%
Meeting place management	58,4%	63,3%	53,6%
Firefighting	59,3%	48,4%	55,1%
Crime Prevention	39,2%	37,3%	35,9%

(Source: Tsujinaka, 2020; own elaboration)

Regarding the main level of analysis to which the research question referred, the hypothesis expecting a greater scope of activities organised in rural situations of shrinkage is corroborated by the data, showing a significant gap in the number of activities organised by the majority of NHAs that favours municipalities located in rural prefectures and whose population is decreasing. Contrariwise, the validation of the expectation of higher participation in rural shrinking contexts was only partial. On one side, shrinking municipalities in less urbanised territories presented an

overall higher household membership level in NHAs. On the other hand, their more urbanised equivalents held greater partaking in most activities scrutinised.

Lastly, addressing the last postulate and the patterns of civic engagement that emerged through the various analysis of activities and participation on the neighbourhood level, it was possible to argue that, from a broad perspective, shrinking cities in different urban contexts indeed present different civic engagement and participation tendencies in the community and civil society groups. High memberships at the household level and usually broader networks characterise shrinking Japanese cities located in more rural prefectures. The activities and events organised in this specific shrinking context appear to focus specifically on maintaining the local environment and supporting the needs of a shifting community, especially those of members with higher necessities like, for example, older people. Though, despite the high number of activities undertaken and the high sense of engagement of the residents, confirmed by the rate of households registered to the examined civil society organisations, the actual participation in activities is low, with only cleaning activities displaying relevant averages.

Contrastingly, shrinking cities in urban prefectures conveyed data indicating a generally lower membership to NHAs. This result was particularly stimulating because the urban area in which these associations operate generally includes less households. Of course, that reduces the financial potentials deriving from membership fees. Nevertheless, the activeness rate and the residents' sense of engagement did not differ from rural shrinking municipalities records. Then again, surprisingly, effective participation in the events from the households registered to NHAs was notably high, with festivals, beautification activities, and general meetings all presenting significant participation averages. Taken together, events, festivals, and similar activities that bring people together and create community feeling were particularly diffuse and relevant in these shrinking societies. Possibly because of their relevance, they also received notable financial support.

In short, in shrinking cities in rural contexts, civic engagement patterns are typified by high membership but lower formal participation and associational commitment to community support and service provision meeting evolving needs. Differently, in urban shrinking cities, effective participation in activities and a focus on activities that foster a sense of community emerge as the main outlines.

These results partially confirmed the image presented by Nishide and Yamauchi (2005), depicting NHAs in rural areas as more extensively involved in the governance aspect and work for the wellbeing of a less engaged community, whereas, in urban ones, they operate more towards regaining a missed sense of community. Additionally, the data only partially supported Taniguchi and Marshall (2015) anticipation of rural communities to comply with the social norms expecting people to participate in the activities organised by local neighbourhood associations. Towards this end, there might indeed be acquiescence to specific types of expected behaviours or, as Haddad (2007) defines them, norms of civic responsibility. The sense of pressure that people might feel because of these expected behaviours could lead them to join the local groups, but that does not necessarily mean that they will also participate in all the related activities.

Turning to the relevant contributions that this examination conveys relating to urban shrinkage scholarship, the overview of how participation patterns can differ in diverse shrinking contexts opens new directions for studying the phenomenon. In particular, it introduces the relevance and impact of the context in which depopulation arises. In other words, the framework within which a shrinking society dwells impacts communal needs and, therefore, shapes the type of action and

organisation that the civil society groups might adopt to supply them accordingly. Even more than so, bridging it to the scholarship on participative behaviour and civil society, the findings present the idea that shrinkage might influence registration to civil society organisations like neighbourhood associations. Results are still fragmented, and future research needs to explore further the strength of the causality link between shrinkage and changes in the engagement and participation levels, but these outcomes open the way towards that direction, posing the basis for these research developments.

One final compelling remark on the findings needs to address the significance of revealing shrinking cities' greater dedication for activities for the care of the elderly within the discourse on urban population decline and civil society participation in healthcare service provision. This pattern allows expanding the scope of the investigation of possible alteration in the local network composed of community, civil society, and businesses based on the provision of said healthcare services in the Japanese community-based integrated care system.

In conclusion, what emerges from this and future research on this topic might be incredibly valuable outside of the Japanese social context. Indeed civil society might show different features in Asia than in the West, and the local network for social services provision might differ, like shrinkage causes and effects, in diverse milieus. Nonetheless, as authors like Döringer et al. (2019) and Ogawa and Seaton (2020) sustained, it is the study of singularities and specific contexts that can lead, through a more transnational and cosmopolitan approach, to a better understanding of an area of study and the development of more precise and comprehensive theories. Accordingly, with Japan being one of the frontrunners in the fight against fast ageing and population decrease, the main theoretical contribution that this study hoped to achieve was that the introduction of the analysis of civil society groups and diverse communities directly affected by shrinkage could eventually introduce a new facet to the study of the social consequences of depopulation. Ultimately, that could help provide the instruments for communities and countries that will face these demographic issues in the foreseeable future with the chance to observe and evaluate the possible reactions and consequences and develop governance practices and policies adequate for their circumstances.

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