

**Revitalising Peripheral Areas Based on the Regional-CES Concept: Application to Imabetsu Town, Aomori**

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**1. Introduction**

Japan's severe population decline is seriously threatening the sustainability of many of its cities, towns, and villages. In a desperate run for survival, all levels of government have hurried to apply strategies aiming at stopping decay. However, instead of adopting a radical agenda and embrace degrowth as a new paradigm, they maintain a pro-growth approach. Accordingly, the development of new infrastructure has been met with high expectations for prosperity. That is the case of Imabetsu, Aomori Prefecture. At just 2,756 inhabitants, it became the smallest municipality in the country to enjoy a stop in the high-speed railway network after the completion of the first trait of the Hokkaido Shinkansen in 2016. The town, whose population has more than halved since the 1950s, have devised a new masterplan to take advantage of the high-speed railway (HSR) and revitalise its local economy. Yet, initial findings seem to disprove the expectations of local planners and offer a much more nuanced perspective on the regional impact of HSR.

By reflecting on the case of Imabetsu, this paper explores alternative mechanisms to cope with shrinkage while striving for transitioning to more sustainable development pathways. It argues that rather than fighting against decline, the town should embrace its smaller size while looking within to find alternative ways to sustain the local community. The town could capitalise in its natural potential to develop a degrowth-based socio-economic system based on developing renewable energy schemes, green tourism, sustainable consumption and production methods, and reutilising its existing and abandoned buildings. In doing this analysis, this paper calls for a careful reconsideration of the contemporary pro-growth approach of Japanese shrinking cities based on unleashing their hidden potential to address socio-economic challenges.

**2. Depopulation and Sustainability in Japan**

Japan is shrinking. Its population peaked in 2010 at 128,057,352 inhabitants and has declined thereafter. Yet, depopulation is unevenly distributed across the country. Some regions continue increasing their population—notably the large

metropolitan areas across the pacific coast of Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka—while the population figures of more peripheral regions is plummeting (Matanle & Rausch, 2011). Many villages, towns, and cities might disappear in a not so distant future if measures to address the socio-economic mismatches inherent to Japan's urban system are not taken (Masuda, 2014).

Similarly to other advanced industrial countries, Japan needs to face the problems consequential to an ageing and shrinking population while simultaneously addressing the current global-scale environmental challenges. Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Environment of Japan, in its Fifth Basic Environment Plan, put forward a novel concept, the Regional Circulating and Ecological Sphere (Regional-CES). The Regional-CES looks for new urban-rural nexuses through which “each region demonstrates its strengths by utilising its unique characteristics, thereby building a self-reliant and decentralised society where different resources are circulated within each region, leading to symbiosis and exchange with neighbouring regions according to the unique characteristics of each region” (Cabinet decision 17 April 2018). The Regional-CES concept could be a turning point in urban and regional development, bringing forward alternative paradigms based on sustainable values (Takeuchi et al., 2019).

**3. Imabetsu Town and the Shinkansen**

Located in the northernmost part of Honshu, in Aomori prefecture, Imabetsu Town encapsulates common tropes found elsewhere in Japan's shrinking localities. Its population peaked in 1955 at 8,144 inhabitants and has decreased ever since. In 2015, 2,756 people called Imabetsu their home, a decrease of more than 65% since the 1950s. The town's economy relies heavily on the primary and secondary sectors—representing respectively 13,48% and 29,93% of its jobs. It also suffers from a high unemployment rate, which in 2015 stood at 8.23% against the 5.31% of Aomori prefecture or the 4.23% of Japan.

Imabetsu welcomed the arrival of the Shinkansen in 2016 with high expectations. Aiming at capitalising this new infrastructure to uplift the town from its current dire state and to stabilise its population at around 2,000 people, local authorities launched a

new comprehensive strategy (今別町総合戦略) (Imabetsu Town Planning Division, 2016). However, the masterplan seems to resort to the same tools deployed by many other shrinking localities across Japan such as luring lifestyle migrants from large Japanese cities or offering free housing thanks to the vast number of empty buildings in the areas.

Unfortunately, these policies—which already showed limited success in other localities in Japan—seem unlikely to change Imabetsu's steady decline. Moreover, the current impact of the Shinkansen does not seem to live up to the initial expectations. Although travel times improved, the town accessibility remains the lowest among the municipalities served by HSR in Aomori and, in 2016 fiscal year, Okutsugaru-Imabetsu station attracted an average of only 35 people per day (Ortiz-Moya & Reggiani, 2019). Whilst it is too early to measure the impact of HSR fully, these figures reveal the inherent flaws of the pro-growth approach that guided Japanese regional planning in the last decades. However, if creatively employed, the presence of a high-speed connection represents a source of untapped potential.

#### 4. Finding Strength Within Itself

An approach based on the recommendations of the Regional-CES might help to identify and design strategies based on Imabetsu's strengths and unique characteristics. This way, the town could better take advantage of the Shinkansen and create sustainable development plans. The strategies outlined in this paper represent recommendations based on opportunities already present within the town but underutilised by current schemes.

- Support for green and blue tourism. Imabetsu's comprehensive strategy mentions the intention to increase the number of tourists. However, the town currently does not have enough infrastructure or touristic attractions to take advantage of the Shinkansen station properly and is often overshadowed by other places in Aomori prefecture. The town could better exploit its assets, such as its location within the Tsugaru Quasi-National Park, to attract a larger number of visitors. Also, Imabetsu could offer a unique experience to urbanites, including home-stays and nature-based activities.
- Support for teleworkers. The new masterplan of Imabetsu refers to temporal population as one of the critical elements to rejuvenate the town. Yet, the contribution of tourism is overemphasised. A more realistic alternative could be to offer support for teleworkers to temporarily move to the town while maintaining their current job in one of the country's large

metropolitan areas. Recent events have shown how many jobs are non-place dependent, especially those in the knowledge economy. Imabetsu counts with a large number of well-preserved vacant houses that could become residences for people wishing to take a temporary break from the busy urban life but keeping their jobs. By allowing faster and more comfortable trips to Tokyo or other economic centres in Tohoku or Kanto, the Shinkansen could be a pivotal element to support this initiative.

- Support for renewable energy initiatives. The town already installed some wind turbines along its coastline, but this characteristic could be reinforced. All over Japan, micro-scale energy initiatives are gaining momentum, and a handful of pioneer municipalities are developing their own electric companies to utilise their natural energy sources. The surplus energy could be sold to nearby cities unable to meet their demand locally and would allow for the creation of new economic linkages.

#### 5. Conclusions

Japanese municipalities aiming at ameliorating depopulation need to go beyond the most common pro-growth and incentive-based measures to find creative ways to confront socio-economic problems from a sustainable perspective. The Regional-CES concept invites localities to think about their unique characteristics to frame novel strategies. In spite of dire socio-economic trends, and helped by the presence of the Shinkansen, this novel approach to planning might be helpful to unlock Imabetsu's hidden potential and identify sustainable development pathways.

#### 6. References

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