

Foreword by the editor

This edition mainly looks at the double problems of ageing society and the decline of rural areas in Japan and the EU. For decades, Japan and EU countries have been experiencing similar socio-economic issues arising from low fertility, a greying workforce, rising urbanisation, and the desertification of numerous rural areas. Despite the growing interest in life in suburban or rural areas since the begin of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of rural areas are suffering from a lack of human and capital resources, often being cut off from the economic development in the cities.

This journal edition looks at possible solutions to revive the countryside and to deal with the recent demographic challenges. Introducing several examples from Japan and a European country, the authors show how communities have managed to rejuvenate and revitalise rural areas, and how they have successfully embraced population ageing. Despite a general focus on the downsides and dangers of ageing societies, this edition highlights that rising longevity also creates many opportunities.

In “Coping with low fertility rates in OECD countries: the case of Japan”, Hiroaki Watanabe analyses the Japanese government’s efforts (and struggles) to raise fertility, highlighting that despite the increase in the number of daycare centers offering more flexibility at a lower price for childcare, more generous child allowances, and a higher take-up rate of maternity leave by working women, Japan has not managed to reverse the downward trend in fertility since the 1990s. Watanabe argues that while free childcare for kids aged 3+ are useful steps to increase equality, the policy measures implemented by recent governments have failed to encourage a large number of low-wage employees working long hours to start a family. He concludes that the hidden agenda of the policies only

targeted low fertility at a superficial level; the main aim might have been industrial policy, aiming to raise the female employment rate to tackle Japan’s decade-long economic stagnation more than to increase fertility.

Michela Riminucci, in her article on “Japan and Diversity as a Strategy to Successfully Manage Demographic Change”, advocates a mentality change among the Japanese. She argues that Japan needs to open its labour market to foreign workers, review their organisational model to potentially reduce their workforce, advance digitalisation, automatisations and the spread of Artificial Intelligence (AI), allow more flexible work models (which might increase the activity rate among the elderly and women), and redistribute corporate profits better among (middle-class) workers in order to support the pension system.

In “Revitalising and rejuvenating the countryside through foreign workers”, Anna Schrade shows that attracting foreign workers could greatly alleviate the rising labour shortages and problems associated with an ageing society in rural areas. She analyses how migrants from China and Vietnam, who have moved to rural Okayama Prefecture (Hinase Town) under the Technical Internship Trainee Programme to support the local oyster finishing and seafood processing industry, have rejuvenated and revitalised the sleepy town. Arguing that without these immigrants, a considerable share of the local oyster businesses would probably have had to close down due to severe labour shortages, Schrade shows that immigration is key for coping with the demographic challenges in Japan.

Keith Jackson’s focus is on how mega events, such as the 2025 Osaka Kansai Expo, could contribute to economic development in rural areas. Highlighting how

the Osaka Expo in 1970 triggered massive investment in infrastructure, he argues that while the same effects on the economy cannot be expected, the Expo still poses a massive chance for Kansai to showcase their region and to attract considerable investment, visitors and potentially even new residents. All these findings can be found in his article on “Memory, influence and rural re-vitalization in Hyogo Prefecture: preparing to evaluate visitor memories of the Osaka World Expo 2025”.

Investigating the British government’s recently announced ‘levelling-up’ agenda in his article “A new regional development policy in the UK”, Francis Rawlinson analyses the government’s push to reduce the inter-regional disparities that exist in Britain, which are among the widest in the industrialised world. The ambitious new policy is an accidental by-product of Brexit, in that the EU referendum brought to light the depth of the discontent among the population of disadvantaged areas and the political risks of further

inaction. As well as describing the necessary scale, scope and ingredients of the new policy, Rawlinson argues that to make serious inroads into the regional inequalities, a decentralisation of decision-making on local economic development away from the central government in London to the English regions, accompanied by further devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is needed.

Despite the different regional focus, we can see parallels in the attempts to revive and rejuvenate the countryside in Japan and the US. The chapters reveal that while numerous policy changes are needed to make Japan and EU countries more future proof, there is potential in both regions to successfully cope with population ageing and rural decline.

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Anna Schrade