

Towards the Development of Attractive Rural Areas

- Realization of "Coming Back to Rural Areas" Where People Go Back and Forth Between Urban and Rural Areas -

(Report of the Panel on the Development of Vibrant Rural Areas)

March 31, 2015

Panel on the Development of Vibrant Rural Areas

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Towards the Development of Attractive Rural Areas

Realization of "Coming Back to Rural Areas" Where People Go Back and Forth Between Urban and Rural Areas

1. Introduction

Rural areas are swinging into action.

Young people are starting to come back to the "village" which is far away from local cities.

In Suo-Oshima Town of Yamaguchi prefecture, young people who moved from the urban areas are working on the cultivation of fruits and AFFrinnovation. Senior migrants are assisting new migration applicants by establishing an organization called "島くらす(Shimakurasu)" with the town office. In 2012, the population of the town finally achieved a social increase.

Young people active at the center of the region.

In Ofunato City of Iwate prefecture, young people engaged in the fishery business are playing a central role in the earthquake disaster reconstruction. They established an organization called "漁師のおつまみ研究所(Ryoshi no Otsumami Kenkyujo; Fishermen's snack lab)" with the local women and are working on the processing and sale of fish and seafood, thereby creating new value and job opportunities for the region.

"Development of villages" is promoted by local people.

In Natauchi district of Nanao City, Ishikawa prefecture, a council for development of villages has been established under the slogan of "Unifying 10 communities." The council is engaged in the development of local specialties such as brand-name rice and is taking on local festivals. Urban residents are moving to the village and are also encouraging those who have left the "village" to come back.

People of urban areas and people of rural areas are getting closer.

Kawaba village of Gunma prefecture concluded an alliance agreement with Setagawa city and has continuously been engaged in activities including the movable classrooms and forest experience for elementary school students and exchanges with members of the elderly circle. The village has become the "second home" for Setagaya residents by accepting their visits and delivering local agricultural products.

New actors of local communities are playing an active role in various fields. Amidst the change in the social structure of Japan after the collapse of the bubble economy, the earthquake disaster reconstruction seems to have triggered a change in the values of young people. They are trying to find the meaning of life in the contact with nature and close connection with people that can be felt only by living in rural areas and the new lifestyle which is not oriented to urban areas.

Their actions based on these new values are fusing with the local residents who are struggling to change their home areas that seemed to be mired in stagnation with no way out.

People have started to go back and forth between urban areas and rural areas. Especially, young people are showing a high level of activity. The nation's diversified interests in rural areas are behind this activity. In this report, let's call this activity "Coming Back to Rural Areas."

Rediscovery of the appeal of rural areas is being promoted. A current of "Coming Back to Rural Areas" is steadily being formed.

At the "Panel on the Development of Vibrant Rural Areas," discussions have been held to find the way for the State and local governments to engage with the local people and to share their challenges, in order to learn from the remarkable on-the-spot activities of the local people and support such efforts.

We expect the activity of "Coming Back to Rural Areas" to become a social and continuous trend and revitalize the rural areas, leading to the recovery of prosperity to local communities.

2. Towards the Development of Attractive Rural Areas

Rural areas are filled with resources.

Approximately 40% of the farmland of Japan is located in the hilly and mountainous areas, producing a good selection of agricultural products and supplying them to the nation. While the farmland area of each house is small, each farm household is growing traditional vegetables and flowering plants of varieties that have been taken over in the region.

Rural areas have land and water in abundance which means they have high potential to supply energy. Forests are the source of supply of building material and forestry products such as mushrooms and recently, they are receiving attention as the source of supply of woody biomass that would be used as raw materials for power generation or heat utilization. Various kinds of fish and seafood that cannot be seen in Tokyo are caught at seashores across the country.

These resources in rural areas have been continuously been protected by the local people from father to son. In spring, all the residents worked hard to clean the dirt in the channels for irrigation, while in the harvesting season, they protected agricultural products from bird and animal damage by patrolling in turns.

The act of "protecting the region by the residents" has been passed from generation to generation in communities for a long period of time, laying the foundation for the residents' lives. The residents have led their lives by raising children, guarding the elderly and helping each other. On ceremonial occasions, the participation of all residents of the community was taken for granted.

However, the ties in local communities have started to come loose.

The residents' energy is decreasing in rural areas where the population is declining and the residents are increasingly aging. In communities where the residents have become unable to work together, abandonment of cultivation is getting worse, the forests are lying neglected, bird and animal invasion has increased and the memories of festivals are fading.

About 70% of the land of rural areas consists of forests, while half of the remaining land is farmland. If the ties in local communities are lost and the residents give up managing forests and farmlands, such loss would not only be suffered by the rural areas but also by the entire nation. We must avoid any situation where the national land of Japan lies neglected and the cultural traditions are lost.

Rural areas have various functions; they do not only supply food to the nation but also preserve the national land, cultivate water sources, supply energy and wood and provide platforms for learning and recreation. In recent years, they are also expected to serve a role to support the urban function at time of disasters.

In order to have attractive rural areas continuously exist and fulfill such multilateral functions, first and foremost, there must be residents. To that end, an interactive society of "Coming Back to Rural Areas" where people go back and forth between urban areas and rural areas must be realized and an

environment where all residents including young and elderly people can actively lead their lives with security must be created.

In this panel, discussions have been held for seven occasions and this report has summarized the visions for the development of attractive rural areas based on the following three fundamental viewpoints.

- (i) Residents of rural areas must be secured to have worthwhile work and sufficient income to support their families.
- (ii) In rural areas where population decline and aging will further advance in the coming years, the ties between regions must be strengthened so that the residents can live with security, the national land would be preserved and the expected multilateral functions would be fulfilled.
- (iii) Attractive rural areas are shared assets of the nation. The challenges faced by rural areas should be considered as issues for the entire nation including urban residents instead of regarding them as the matter of rural areas.

3. Creation of Jobs in Rural Areas – Creation of Village Works, Mountain Works and Marine Works

(1) Creation of job opportunities utilizing resources in rural areas and increase of income

The first job which is worthwhile for people living in rural areas and by which they can gain experience that is hard to obtain in urban areas can be found in the industry utilizing the rich resources of rural areas.

Creating job opportunities by utilizing resources in rural areas is a measure by which the appeal of working at rural areas can be developed to a maximum level and be highly appealing to the migrants from urban areas.

The core industry utilizing resources in rural areas is agricultural, forestry and fisheries and it is natural to pursue their development and industrialization. Yet, it is further necessary to incorporate industries related to agriculture, forestry and fisheries in the rural areas and to create "village works, mountain works and marine works."

The following measures must be promoted from the standpoint that it is important to increase the value of resources in local communities and return profits to the local communities with respect to the creation of job opportunities and increase of income by these industrial developments.

(i) Building of a network for "economic circulation in the region"

A network for "economic circulation in the region" where the values that have been flowing out from the region will be reinvested in the region will be built by discovering non-conventional feed resources buried in the region or creating high-added value therefor through the promotion of AFFrinnovation of agriculture, forestry and fisheries mainly by the local people engaged in agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

In Maniwa City of Okayama Prefecture, the local government and private organizations have jointly promoted activities to realize economic circulation in the region by returning the revenue from sales of electric power gained outside the region to businesses related to forestry and promoting job creation and forest improvement while working on the local production for local consumption of energy utilizing wood biomass resources.

In Shiwa Town of Iwate Prefecture, the local residents including forest households engaged in self-rotation forestry are using unused thinned wood as biomass resources at facilities in the region. In addition, in Sumita Town of Iwate Prefecture, the cooperatives, etc. of the region established a laminated wood plant and the whole town built new town offices using local timber with an aim to "develop the town into the best town in Japan at forestry."

Moreover, local actors including fishery operators themselves have developed a "fishing village revitalization plan" to implement in a structured manner measures such as improvement of added value in light of the actual circumstances of each fishing village, leading to the increase of income of fishery operators and revitalization of fishing villages.

As described above, local values can be increased and their attractiveness can be transmitted in and outside the region by promoting industries in which local people participate and which utilize regional resources by sustainable methods.

Furthermore, in the future, we aim to develop the rural areas into a wide economic zone by strengthening the economic ties with other local communities and building a network covering multiple municipalities with rural areas at the core.

- (ii) Establishment of an environment where social enterprises (social business) can play an active role

Agriculture, forestry and fisheries as well as industries related thereto are strongly connected to the resources, people and land of regions and have contributed to the revitalization of regions as an industry rooted in the region over a long period of time.

Moreover, recently, there are movements mainly among the young generations to start what is generally called social enterprises (social business) where they work on the solution of local challenges led by the private sector and contribute to the revitalization of the local community while running a small business by utilizing resources in rural areas including agricultural, forestry and fisheries products and various human resources of regions.

In Yoshida town of Unnan City, Shimane Prefecture, local residents have launched a company with the administration and are performing water projects and running local busses while selling processed goods utilizing local agricultural products.

We will establish an environment where new human resources can play an active role in the future by aggressively evaluating these kinds of movements as a business form wherein agriculture, forestry and fisheries as well as AFFrinnovation can be focused as the core business, "self-help" function can be created while arranging the roles within the region and contribution to the local society can be continued while eyeing the utilization of crowd-funding (hometown investment) that supports local revitalization.

(2) Creation of platforms in which a diversity of people can actively participate

Participation of local women and migrants from urban areas in the activities of local communities provides stimulus to the local people and provides the opportunity to freshly recognize the appeal of rural areas.

In the past, many officials dispatched to local areas as a member of "田舎で働き隊(Inaka de Hataraki Tai; Team with Ambitions to Work in Rural Areas)" (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)) or "地域おこし協力隊(Chīki Okoshi Kyouryoku Tai; Team for Economic Development Project in Regions)" (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC)) have put down their roots in the region even after the completion of the project and are playing active roles as local coordinators, etc.

Furthermore, this diversified group of people is expected to discover non-conventional feed resources that the local people are not aware of and revitalize traditional skills and cultures that are at risk of being lost, and thereby develop them into new measures for AFFrinnovation or green tourism to be undertaken by the whole region.

The following measures must be promoted from the standpoint of contributing to the revitalization of the local economy with respect to the establishment of an environment in which such a diversified group of people can actively participate.

(i) Establishment of an environment in which women can actively participate

Women are playing an important role at the production site of agriculture, forestry and fisheries or measures for AFFrinnovation by utilizing their abilities to understand consumer needs and communicate. In particular, farming entities in which women are participating tend to have large sales turnovers with increased sales and earning capacity.

In Takayama City of Gifu Prefecture, a female tomato farmer has achieved a pioneer AFFrinnovation in the region by launching the processing and sale of tomato processed products such as dried tomatoes and puree by grasping the consumer needs and incorporating a stock company and is practicing "a unique and new farming style" utilizing women's sensitivity.

We will develop an environment in which the activities of such women are promoted and they can actively participate in various scenes as the future leaders of rural areas.

(ii) Establishment of an environment in which people with societal experience can actively participate

There are cases where persons who have gained societal experience by engaging in business take a new job after moving to the rural areas, find the potential of resources in rural areas and develop new businesses or are active in the regions as the advisors thereof.

In Kyotango City of Kyoto Prefecture, a person who had worked at an IT company changed his/her career and became a new manager who took over a closed village-owned store and joined the village as

"Inaka de Hataraki Tai."

These persons are expected to reinforce the abilities lacking in rural areas such as marketing and accounting work and to actively participate as capable persons that contribute to the development of the local economies. In addition, we will establish an environment where various outside personnel can further actively participate in the rural areas as one of the measures which can expand the platform for persons who have reached the age of retirement to make local contributions, and contribute to the realization of a society where every person is active for their entire lifetime.

4. Strengthening of the Ties Between Communities – Creation of Network Between Communities -

(1) Maintenance and enhancement of the functions of local communities

Japan has entered the phase of population decline. If this current trend of population decline continues, approximately 13,000 rural communities would be endangered and even if the birthrate of Japan rapidly recovers, population decline is expected to continue for the coming 50 years.

It is also assumed that there will be more communities which face difficulty in independently providing life services, etc. due to the advancement of population decline and aging.

As described above, in order to enable the residents to live with security in the future, the following measures must be promoted from the standpoint of seeking maintenance and enforcement of the community function by the whole region while concentrating the functions in the key community (for example, the community where the office of the former municipality that existed prior to the merger in the Showa period is located) and securing necessary functions for the region through enhancement of the network between communities.

(i) Concentration of functions in the base and enhancement of network

The relevant ministries and agencies will cooperate and carry out measures by utilizing their policy tools and sharing responsibilities to promote the formation of a network between the "small base," in which the bases for providing life services such as clinics, nursing homes and welfare facilities, day-care centers and community centers are centered, and the surrounding communities in a group of communities of the size of primary school areas (the former municipality prior to the merger in the Showa period) based on the actual circumstances of the region from the standpoint of maintaining the community function by the whole region amidst the advancing population decline and aging therein.

In addition, measures will be developed to concentrate the processing and sales facilities for agricultural, forestry and fisheries products in the key community in promoting AFFriinnovation and exchanges with the urban areas. In fishing villages, concentration of the fishery marketing function and advancement of the landing function will be promoted under the originality and ingenuity of the region.

In Jinego District of Yurihonjo City, Akita Prefecture, agricultural products processing facilities have been developed together with the development of roadside stations and welfare facilities. Local farmers are bringing agricultural products and selling them as local specialties at roadside stations.

Through these efforts, a flow of network where human resources, products and services will be delivered to the region as a whole mainly by the "base" will be created. In addition, attention shall be paid to securely protect farmland and forests to be preserved by the whole region and pass them on to the next generation.

(ii) Realization of land-use led by the residents

In order to promote the development of beautiful and vibrant rural areas and to recover prosperity to the region while responding to the coming depopulating society, it is important to clarify the future vision including the appropriate land use to realize such development in addition to establishing a

comfortable living environment and securing job opportunities and income.

In drawing such future vision of the region, people living there must be central to this.

To this end, we will examine a mechanism where the local residents can discuss the appropriate land-use of the region in the future and consider how land use can be arranged in an orderly manner for preservation of farmlands, incorporation of industry related to agriculture into existing developed lands and consolidation of life-related facilities.

(2) Maintenance and management of resources in rural areas

In Japan, farm work and management of farmland and channels have been carried out in the unit of communities. In addition, ties between communities have been maintained through joint performance of these works and the residents have supported each other in their entire lives.

However, recently, there are an increasing number of local communities facing difficulty in independently managing farmlands due to the decline in the number of residents and their aging. At the same time, the bases for approaching the elderly and watching over children which have been naturally carried out in the past are being lost.

On the other hand, in some regions, there are cases where communities have concluded a cooperative agreement by taking advantage of the system for direct payment to farmers in the hilly and mountainous areas or where several communities jointly incorporate a farming organization.

As described above, the following measures must be promoted from the standpoint that promotion of cooperation between communities in local areas facing difficulty in independently maintaining their functions not only contributes to the maintenance and management of resources in rural areas but also leads to the formation of bases to support the lives of residents.

(i) Promotion of measures that maintain and fulfill multilateral functions by the whole region

If the joint activities by the residents of the community are neglected, not only the farmlands and channels would be devastated but also abandonment of cultivation would increase. Moreover, it would also allow invasion by wild birds and animal and accelerate farm retirement or moving out from the community. This kind of vicious cycle causes further decline in the function of communities and is feared to substantially impair the multilateral functions stated in the section "2. Towards the Development of Attractive Rural Areas."

For this reason, we will promote measures that assist joint management of farmlands and channels, etc. based on the cooperation between communities, measures against bird and animal damages taken by the whole region and preservation and management of forests and seaweed beds and tidal flats and also maintain and fulfill the multilateral functions by the whole region along with the mutual support between the neighboring communities.

Furthermore, we will seek the possibility of actively accepting "commuting cultivation" by actors coming from outside the region based on the premise that the residents in the region will continuously jointly manage farmlands, etc. as the measures to maintain and fulfill the multilateral functions in a stable manner in the future and further examine the appropriate way of role sharing between such actors and the farmers and other residents of the community in such form of agricultural management.

(ii) Promotion of measures that support regional life

Amidst the advancement of the population decline and aging in the community, there are cases

where young people and actors of agriculture, forestry and fisheries take the leading role in establishing private organizations and incorporated NPOs, etc. and work on the maintenance of resources in rural areas and revitalization of agriculture, forestry and fisheries with the residents.

These organizations are supporting farmers who are facing troubles in shipment of agricultural products or purchase of agricultural materials due to aging and also complementing the community functions which have been assumed by the community in the past such as communicating with the elderly or assisting shopping.

In Kushiike District of Joetsu City, Niigata prefecture, 11 communities concluded an agreement in cooperation to support communities facing difficulty in independently managing farmlands by the whole area. They are also working on AFFrinnovation, exchanges with urban areas and farm-yard shipping services.

These activities can be proactively defined as those wherein the residents assume part of the public services and disaster response which have been performed by administrative organs amid the advancement of municipality mergers.

We will promote these kinds of establishment of organizations and development of businesses that are capable of widely disseminating the measures which support the local life and flexibly responding to various local needs of each region.

5. Enhancement of Connection With Urban Residents – Creation of a Cohesive Society for Urban and Rural Areas -

(1) Strengthening of the ties between urban areas and rural areas

Rural areas are playing various roles such as supply of energy and wood, disaster prevention and provision of platforms for nature education and recreation or rest in addition to the functions of safe supply of food, preservation of national land and conservation of water sources. Therefore, maintenance and fulfillment of the community functions of rural areas give blessings not only to the residents of rural areas but also to the entire nation including urban residents.

Meanwhile, connection with urban residents may allow the people living in the rural areas to rediscover the attractive points of the area such as the buried resources in rural areas or skills and culture which have been taken over by the residents, leading to the increased value of the region.

As described above, the following measures must be promoted in line with the idea that specific measures should be examined with an aim to: understand that the urban areas and rural areas are in a mutually complementary relationship and that they cannot be separated either in economic or social terms; achieve "independence of the region" by demonstrating the unique character of both urban and rural areas; and form an interactive society of "Coming Back to Rural Areas."

(i) Improving the understanding of the nation

The connection between urban and rural areas will be enhanced so that the entire nation can share the recognition anew that the realization of the development of attractive rural areas leads to the promotion of fulfillment of the multilateral functions served by agriculture, farming villages and forests and that the entire nation including urban residents are receiving various benefits from rural areas.

In Naganuma Town of Hokkaido, projects for homestay at farm households have started from around 2003 based on the idea to "reduce the distances between consumers and ordinary citizens." Nowadays, about 3,700 primary to high school students are accepted a year by more than 150 farm households and are provided with farming experiences and life-experiences at farm households. In Yasuoka Village of Nagano Prefecture, study programs at mountain villages, wherein urban children stay in the village for a long period of time and study at local primary and junior high schools, are performed to provide them the opportunities to study about forests.

As described above, we will develop an environment to accept urban residents of a wide-range of generations in cooperation with relevant ministries and agencies to enable them get acquainted with rural areas and thereby seek improved understanding on the importance of the connection between urban and rural areas.

(ii) Strategic promotion of exchanges between urban and rural areas

Exchanges between urban and rural areas deepen the urban residents' understanding on rural areas and agriculture, forestry and fisheries while triggering the regional residents to rediscover the attractive points buried in the rural areas and recover their pride and confidence.

Recently, projects such as lodging experiences at rural areas for children and green tourism are becoming active and homestay at farm households and farmers' restaurants are also increasing.

Moreover, there are cases where the local governments conclude an agreement and promote regular exchanges between residents or develop exchange programs in cooperation with universities or companies; organizational exchange is also increasing by enhancement of the connection between urban residents and rural areas in the case of disaster.

In Kamiakizu of Tanabe City, Wakayama Prefecture, farmer's restaurants and facilities for farm work experiences have been developed by using abolished school buildings and such facilities are managed mainly by the local residents as "Akizuno Garten." In Sakaki Town of Nagano Prefecture, a forest producers' cooperative association concluded an agreement with a top retailer in Tokyo and is accepting forest improvement activities by employee volunteers from such company.

In addition, in Towada City of Aomori Prefecture, as a result of attracting students in school excursions from Asian countries by homestay at farm households and establishment of councils by local universities and development of foreign students into international language supporters, the number of general overseas tourists also increased, resulting in the tripling of the number of invited foreigners in the past three years in 2013 (525).

While using these cases as references, we will promote aggressive and strategic measures based on the originality and ingenuity of the region so as to prevent the exchanges between urban and rural areas from ending as a transient boom but instead make such cases lead to the creation of job opportunities and increase of income as well as the recovery of prosperity at rural areas.

(2) Expansion of options for various lifestyles

More opportunities for exchanges between urban and rural areas would increase the urban residents' interests in life in rural areas and agriculture, forestry and fisheries. It may further produce people who enhance their connection with rural areas by frequently visiting the rural areas and staying at farm households or visiting farmer's markets.

In addition, increasing the opportunities for urban residents to have contact with rural areas is not only expected to increase both the number of persons who ultimately decide to move and settle in rural areas or those who may not move or settle in rural areas but start living both in the urban and rural area, but also could prompt persons who left the rural area to come back.

As described above, the following measures must be promoted by proactively evaluating whether exchanges between urban and rural areas expand the options for various lifestyles and lead to the realization of "Coming Back to Rural Areas" for the residents of both the urban and rural areas.

(i) Promotion of migration to rural areas

In some of the rural areas where population is declining, more migrants are accepted, thereby achieving excess migration mainly in the generations of children and working people. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of social change in population displays great variation for each municipality within the same prefecture or for each district within the same municipality.

While it is undeniable that the social change in population within municipalities and districts widely swing due to circumstances specific to the region such as housing developments and improvement or abolishment of company housing, other elements such as the eagerness of the local government, the head thereof or the regional community for accepting migrants, dispatch of information by senior migrants and the degree of development of the environment to start up business or be employed at the region are also considered to be contributing to the achievement of social increase.

In Irokawa Region of Nachikatsuura Town, Wakayama Prefecture, migration applicants are provided with the opportunity to have an interview with 15 regional residents and decide their migration after the potential migrants and local residents get to know each other well. As a result, the number of children has increased and the regional primary and junior high schools are maintained.

We will support these kinds of mechanisms that provide rich information on jobs and life in the region and enable migration applicants to live on-site as "a trial" and measures of municipalities and regions that perform matching (arrangements) between migration applicants and regional residents.

(ii) Promotion of further activities by "Inaka de Hataraki Tai" and other teams

Under the system of "Inaka de Hataraki Tai" performed by MAFF since 2009, approximately 1,100 persons mainly consisting of young people in their 20s and 30s have been dispatched to rural areas and have assumed responsibility for the program's autonomous development in areas such as the exchange between urban and rural areas. In addition, more than half of them have settled in the region even after the termination of their dispatch period and are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fisheries or revitalization of the region.

At the same time, under the system of "Chiiki Okoshi Kyoryoku Tai" performed by MIC, about 1,000 persons have engaged in the regional cooperation activities at depopulated areas, etc. by FY2013 and about 60% of them have settled in the same region after the termination of their terms.

Further consideration is made to integrate and expand these two systems based on the instructions of the Headquarter for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan from the standpoint of further responding to the local needs and making the systems easier to use.

To this end, the relevant ministries and agencies will further accelerate discussions to promptly integrate application information provided by the region, performance of integrated training, sharing of activity information and exchanges between the team members.

6. Towards the Next Step

(1) Take the first step

Development of attractive rural areas always starts from the actual practice at site.

In the Seki District of Nantan City, Kyoto prefecture, the residents held many discussions by setting contents to be worked on utilizing the attractiveness of the region and are working on the direct marketing of Tamba Black Soybean and activities to experience rural life.

In Natauchi District of Nanao City, Ishikawa prefecture, although community renovation activities started in 1981, they were dormant for a time due to conflict between the communities. However, the activities were resumed from 1992 based on the residents' concerns and currently, communities' farming organizations have been incorporated.

It is not necessarily appropriate to call these measures, including the cases mentioned above "advanced cases." This is because no site can be considered to be "advanced" given the difference in the path to be taken in each site.

However, we can learn a lot from these "advanced cases" in which the process of trial and error has been conducted in advance.

What is important is to take actions using the wisdom and ideas of the regional people and such actions could start from the approaches of the town office or ideas of "foreigners" that visited the region.

In either case, such actions are the first step, in other words, the seeds for developing attractive rural areas, and the accumulation of activities following such actions are expected to bloom and produce substantial outcomes.

In this report, "points of measures" are attached to serve as a "guidepost" for those who intend to engage in the development of attractive rural areas in the region in the future by conducting practical activities by referring to the "advanced cases."

(2) Distances between urban and rural areas must be reduced

There are more than a few people who live in urban areas and have high interest in rural areas but have no idea how to contact rural areas.

In a public opinion survey conducted in August 2014, 89.9% of the respondents answered that exchanges between urban and rural areas are necessary; this is more than a 10-point increase in comparison to that in 2005. In addition, 31.6% of urban residents had hopes to settle in rural areas, which is more than a 10-point increase in comparison to that in 2005.

Although these numbers have not directly led to the increase in the exchanges between urban and rural areas or migration and settlement therein, the urban residents' activities to deepen their relationship with rural areas are gradually but securely spreading.

In Hokuto City of Yamanashi Prefecture, a person, who was engaged in management consultancy in

Tokyo, launched an incorporated NPO after migration, reclaimed abandoned land for cultivation along with urban youth and is engaged in the cultivation of vegetables. In addition, companies are utilizing farms for employee training or experiential tours for customers, playing a role in the improvement of human relations or formation of the human network in the company.

In Nishiawakura Town of Okayama Prefecture, people who sympathized with the plan called "百年の森林構想(Hyakunen no Mori Koso; A plan to create a 100 years old forest)" promoted by the village, invested in the costs for introducing new forestry machines by utilizing the mechanism of hometown investment (crowd funding). In addition, these efforts have deepened the connection between urban residents and the region and have led to the increase in the number of young people returning to their hometown.

Each activity performed in the urban and rural areas is connected to the revitalization of the region and supporting of the national land of Japan. In order to develop attractive rural areas, each of us must understand the goals of these activities and put them into practice.

We hope that this report will be widely used at activity sites to encourage people who are willing to take their first steps.

Regarding the state of examinations at the "Panel on the Development of Vibrant Rural Areas"

1. Purpose

The "Panel on the Development of Vibrant Rural Areas" consisting of experts is held with an aim to promote examination on the visions for the development of vibrant rural areas and measures to realize it from a wide perspective, under the recognition that the target vision of rural areas must be discussed by facing the depopulating society and forecasting the future state of rural areas.

2. Members

Akihisa Aoyama, Member of the editorial board at the Tokyo Head Office of the Yomiuri Shimbun

Mitsuyoshi Ando, Associate professor of the Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences of Tokyo University

(Chairperson) Tokumi Odagiri, Professor of School of Agriculture of Meiji University

Namiko Numao, Professor of the College of Economics of Nihon University

Ko Fujiyama, Managing Director for Research Affairs at the Hilly and Mountainous Areas Research Center of Shimane Prefecture

Keiko Matsunaga, Associate professor of the Graduate School for Creative Cities of Osaka City University

3. State of past examinations

First meeting: July 23, 2014 (Wed)

Subjects: (i) Visions towards the development of vibrant rural areas
(ii) Future schedules

Second meeting: August 25, 2014 (Mon)

Subjects: Measures for revitalization of rural areas

- Measures for promotion of settlement
- Measures for economic circulation within the region
- Measures to support regional life

Third meeting: September 26, 2014 (Fri)

Subjects: (i) Measures for revitalization of rural areas

- Measures for concentration of the community functions (development of bases)
- Measures for exchanges between urban and rural areas
- New measures utilizing resources in rural areas

(ii) (Draft) Summary of issues

Fourth meeting: October 31, 2014 (Fri)

Subjects: (i) Interviews with organizations involved in the development of regions

- Tsuneyoshi supermarket (Kyotango City of Kyoto Prefecture)
- Natauchi council for development of hometowns (Nanao City of Ishikawa Prefecture)

(ii) (Draft) Summary of issues
(iii) Plans for future meetings

Fifth meeting: December 9, 2014 (Tue)

Subjects: (i) Interviews with the Forestry Agency and Fisheries Agency
(ii) Interim report

Sixth meeting: February 19, 2015 (Thu)

Subject: Practice toward the development of attractive rural areas

Seventh meeting: March 23, 2015 (Mon)

Subject: Summarization of the visions toward the development of attractive rural areas