Regional Empowerment for Japan’s Growth
Building local success stories
Regionalism Revitalizes Japan

How reducing regional disparity can be part of the solution to demographic challenges

The world’s population is poised to essentially stop growing by the end of this century, UN projections indicate that annual population growth will slow to just 0.1% in the last five years of the century, from 1.2% in the first five years. Japan, where the population has been declining since peaking in 2008, is the world’s pioneer in population decline and aging. So its experience will be instructive for other nations. Especially evident from that experience is the importance of shaping an equitable distribution of opportunity across regions and age groups.

Where populations will age and shrink (psst: nearly everywhere)

Only in Africa will populations be growing significantly at the turn of the century, according to the UN projections. The number of Europeans will begin declining in the 2020s and the numbers of Asians and Latin Americans early in the second half of the century. Immigration could help keep North America and Oceania out of negative-growth territory, but just barely.

We are getting older, meanwhile, as we begin to grow fewer.

The UN projects a threefold increase from 2010 to 2050 in the world’s over-65 population, to 1.5 billion. And our median age is headed toward a projected 41 years at the turn of the century, from 29 in 2013.

Demographics’ geographical dimension

Population shrinkage and aging are causes and also results of demographic differentials between regions. Urban centers draw people—especially young people—away from nonurban areas. Childbearing rates for women of the same age brackets tend to be lower in big cities than in the countryside or in provincial towns and cities. So urbanization can undermine nations’ fertility. The migration of young people, meanwhile, raises the average age in nonurban regions and lowers it in metropolitan regions.

The Over-65 Percentage of the Population in 2015 by Region

Urban-nonurban differentials are especially pronounced in Japan. Greater Tokyo, including the capital’s neighboring prefectures of Chiba, Kanagawa, and Saitama, alone accounts for more than a quarter of the nation’s population. So measures for revitalizing nonmetropolitan regions are the centerpiece of the Abe government’s program for tackling Japan’s demographic challenges. Those measures include initiatives for increasing the competitiveness of Japanese agriculture, incentives and deregulation in support of regional entrepreneurship, the establishment of a nationwide network of village hubs to serve localities with medical care and with other crucial services, and investment in transport infrastructure for supporting stepped-up interchange among regional centers.

Toward a more procreative Japan

Japan’s government is staging a campaign of unprecedented tenacity to change the course of the nation’s demographics. In the absence of policy intervention, Japan’s population will shrink to 97 million in 2060, according to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. The Abe government is moving aggressively, however, to prevent that decline and to ensure that Japan retains a population of at least 100 million in 2040.

Highlighting the government’s demographic campaign are bold measures for raising Japan’s total fertility rate. That rate was 1.43 in 2013, well below the population-maintenance level of 2.06, Japanese government planners calculated that a rise in the fertility rate to 1.40 by 2020, to 1.80 by 2030, and to 2.07 by 2040 would keep the population larger than 100 million in 2040. Testifying to the viability of that goal are government survey findings that Japanese couples desire more children than they are having. Those findings suggest that shaping a social framework more amenable to bearing and raising children would engender a higher fertility rate.

The Abe government is working systematically to shape a procreativity-friendly social framework. An initiative well under way will increase the capacity of Japan’s childcare centers by 400,000 children by March 2018. And the government is promoting business to enable women to bear and raise children without compromising their careers.

Fostering economic activity outside Japan’s megapopulations, meanwhile, will also encourage procreation. Here again, survey findings are optimism. A sample of Japan’s big-city dwellers report that they would prefer to live in a less-urban setting if work were available. That finding bodes well for the potential of the Abe government’s regional development initiatives to lure more Japanese to higher-fertility environs.

Minimizing Japan’s Population Decline by Raising the Total Fertility Rate

Leveraging Creativity through a Sound Demographic Profile

Shinjiro Koizumi
Parliamentary Secretary Cabinet Office of Japan

Spearheading the Abe government’s initiatives for promoting regional development outside Japan’s big cities is Shinjiro Koizumi. A member of Japan’s lower house of parliament, Koizumi handles his regional development responsibilities as a parliamentary secretary in the Cabinet Office. The youthful parliamentarian evokes a passionate purposefulness in articulating the task at hand.

“My generation,” declares the 33-year-old Koizumi, “has inherited the challenges of a shrinking and aging population. Our job is to tackle that challenge head on. Our predecessors in the Meiji period and in the postwar era built and rebuilt a modern nation by importing Western expertise and technology. But no nation has ever experienced the kind of population shrinkage and aging that are occurring in Japan. So we have no one to turn to for guidance this time around. In our nation building for the 21st century, we need to blaze our own trail.”

Koizumi emphasizes the importance regional development in coping with Japan’s demographic challenges. He has taken a strong personal interest in several projects that are underway at off-the-beaten-track sites across Japan. One of those projects consists of developing satellite offices in the Tokushima Prefecture village of Kamiyama. The satellite offices create web content and conduct other digital work for Tokyo-based companies. They have attracted several information technology professionals who want to do leading-edge work but want to live with their families in a rural environment.

Bootstrapping sustainability

“The project leaders’ strokes of genius,” says Koizumi of the Kamiyama project, “was the notion of ‘creative depopulation.’ He realized that overall population decline is unavoidable over the long term. But he set out to shape a demographic profile that would engender lasting vitality for the village: young professionals, for example, and people who would stay and serve them, such as two who have opened a bakery and a French restaurant. Koizumi also cites a project in Okayama Prefecture (photo, below) for producing cross-laminated timber—a strong-as-steel building material—from formerly underused forest resources. And he is just getting started. Off his tongue rolls a list of successful projects in Iwate, in Shimane, in Hiroshima, and in other prefectures. Common to all the diverse projects is a reluctance to accept government money and a bootstrapping determination to place projects on a self-financing basis. ‘We’re looking for development,’ concludes Koizumi, ‘that will keep attracting people 10 years, 100 years down the line. Sustainability is our guiding principle for our nation building for the 21st century.’”
The World Discovers the Other Japan

A global cast of individuals and companies has tapped unsuspected potential in Japan—building businesses and building careers, investing capital and investing passion. Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya attract, of course, their share of the investment that is pouring into the nation. But some of the most interesting inward investment is unfolding outside of the megalopolises—in Japan’s medium-sized cities and even in towns and villages across the countryside. Thus is a teeming, international mix of input fueling the regional renaissance that is reinvigorating Japan.

Building on a Cosmopolitan History

Kobe, with a population of 1.5 million, epitomizes the medium-sized cities that are asserting impressive vigor throughout Japan. An important seaport, Kobe played a pivotal role in Japan’s Westernization and modernization and was long the nation’s most cosmopolitan city. It remains a business hub, served by Shinkansen bullet trains and an airport, as well as its famous harbor.

Kobe accommodates high-tech industrial activities as well as retail and entertainment facilities. Public transport is efficient and convenient, with buses, trams, and subway lines. Photo: Kobe City

The business-friendly environment in Kobe has attracted more than 240 foreign companies. Those corporate residents include the Japanese headquarters of Ei Liivy and Company, Nestlé S.A., and Procter & Gamble Co. Kobe’s appeal is evident in this testimonial from Nestlé, which has been part of the local community since 1922. “Kobe is a forward-looking city blessed with nature and a wonderful living environment. We are pleased to chart our future growth here.”

Kobe’s business environment is an extensive infrastructure of research laboratories and related facilities. Highlighting that infrastructure is the Kobe Biomedical Innovation Cluster. The cluster hosts laboratories, plants, and offices of some 280 medical-sector companies and other organizations from the private and public sectors along with hospitals and a world-class supercomputer.

Foreign companies that set up operations in Kobe benefit, too, from a generous package of financial incentives. Those incentives include reductions of up to 90% in local taxes for up to 10 years.

Entrepreneurship Born of Cultural Heritage

Complementing the influx of foreign entrepreneurship into Japan is a dynamic portfolio of homegrown enterprise. Imaginative ventures are rejuvenating communities throughout Japan. Especially notable is the story of Nakamura Brace Co., Ltd., a manufacturer of prostheses in Shimonoseki Prefecture.

Immediately striking about Nakamura Brace is its location. The headquarters and plant are in the village of Omoricho, a community of barely 400 residents. Omoricho also is the location of the historic Iwami Ginzan silver mine, a World Heritage Site. In the 1600s, that mine yielded as much 38 tons of silver annually—one-third of global production—and Omoricho’s population reached more than 100,000. But the population declined along with the output from the mines, which closed in 1923.

“Medical art”

Nakamura Brace’s founder and president, Toshiro Nakamura, was born in Omoricho in 1918. He was the son of a prosthodontist, but the family lost most of its property in Japan’s postwar agrarian land reforms. Nakamura needed a job after finishing high school, and a chance introduction led to a job at a Kyoto manufacturer of prostheses. After six years there, he traveled to the United States to study prosthetics at the University of California at Los Angeles, and he subsequently worked at a California maker of prostheses.

“I was amazed,” recalls Nakamura, “at the level of prosthetic care in the United States. Japan had nothing comparable, so I decided to set up a company here to supply prosthetic products as good as the ones in the United States. And I was determined to show that a company could succeed in Omoricho. I wanted to show that the village could flourish anew as a beacon of regional revitalization. Our silver had attracted the world here in the 16th century. Our creativity and artisanship would draw the world back to Omoricho in the 21st century.”

Nakamura did better than create products “as good as” his US progenitors. His company, established in 1974, spawned a new generation of prosthetics with artisanship he characterizes as “medical art” and functionality. Over time, Nakamura’s products have garnered attention throughout the global medical community, and the company’s performance as a model of regional entrepreneurship has also captured attention.

Community receptivity to new ideas

A recent visitor to Nakamura Brace was Shigeru Ishiba, the Abe government’s minister in charge of regional revitalization. Ishiba represents a district in Tottori Prefecture, which borders Shimane to the east. So he was interested in this tale of business success in a prefectural neighbor on the Japan Sea. Familiar with the region’s less-than-convenient logistics, Ishiba was impressed at Nakamura Brace’s success in winning and serving global business from its Omoricho location.

“I’ve seen several businesses that have achieved remarkable success in small communities,” commented Ishiba. “And something that most of them have in common is a strong and charismatic leader. It’s often a native of the community who has been away for study or work and who has come home, like you, Nakamura-san, with a compelling idea for a new venture.”

“Toshio always remember the encouragement that I received from the chamber of commerce when I came back in the 1970s,” recalled Nakamura. “The people there urged me to go with my hunches. That kind of openness to new ideas is important in fostering business in any community.”

Especially gratifying for Nakamura is the positive demographic change under way in Omoricho. The community welcomed six newly born members in 2016. And it is attracting residents, such as a couple that studied bread making in Germany and is setting up a bakery in Omoricho.

Building an Industry

Ross Findlay is an Australian entrepreneur in Hokkaido who has launched more than a business there. He has single-handedly put in place Japan’s first comprehensive menu of guided outdoor adventuring.

Findlay’s brainchild is Niseko Adventure Centre. He established the center in 1999 in Niseko’s Niseko district, famed for its ski resorts. His initial offering was summertime whitewater rafting. The center has since added kayaking and a winter slate of snowshoeing, backcountry skiing, and downhill skiing. Escorting the center’s customers on the different adventures are some 30 full-time guides and 15 part-timers.

Born in Melbourne in 1945, Findlay graduated from the University of Canberra’s Centre for Sports Studies in 1985. He came to Japan in 1989 and worked as a ski instructor in Sapporo before moving to the Niseko district in 1992. He noted the lack of sporting options for summer tourists and launched Niseko Adventure Centre to address that lack.

“Niseko was great for winter sports,” recalls Findlay. “But it didn’t have much in the way of organized outdoor adventures for summer visitors.” Findlay takes pride in the growing numbers of summer tourists in Niseko, some of them lured by his company’s adventure offerings. He also notes happily that the district is bucking the demographic bans of rural Japan. Young people are flocking to Niseko, drawn by the outdoors appeal promoted so effectively by Findlay’s adventure center.

Building a Career

Cummings was born in Pennsylvania in 1946 and attended Pennsylvania State University. She spent a year in Japan as an exchange student in 1991 and returned on graduating in 1993 to participate in preparations for the Nagano 1998 Olympic Winter Games. Cummings later went to work as the public relations manager at the confectioner Obuseido in the Nagano Prefecture village of Obuse.

Obuseido was the offspring of the Maushichi-Shimura Sake Brewery, established in the mid-18th century. Cummings revitalized the brewery, remodeling the facilities, opening an onsite restaurant and guesthouse, hosting cultural events, and developing a portfolio of high-quality brews to appeal to the restaurant interest in sake.

Like Findlay, Cummings delights in pastoral Japan. “Enjoy the outdoors,” she urges, “and experience the real Japan—the heartland.”

Cummings became in 1999 the first non-Japanese member of the Japan Sake Brewers Association Junior Council. She has initiated a national effort to promote traditional brewing and fermentation in oak wooden barrels and has launched the company Bunkajibyobo to propagate regional cultural and traditions.

Sarah Marie Cummings has made her mark in the quintessentially Japanese Industry of sake brewing. The first Western woman to earn certification as a sake sommelier, she has overseen a turnaround at the Maushichi-Shimura Sake Brewery into a magnet for tourists.

Cummings transformed the Maushichi-Shimura Sake Brewery into a magnet for tourists.
Japan Invests in Rebuilding

Promoting economic vitality in the Japanese countryside is a central plank in the Abe government’s program for revitalizing the nation. A special emphasis in Japan’s resurgent regionalism is Tohoku—the northern end of the island of Honshu. Numerous communities in Tohoku suffered horrific devastation in the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. The rebuilding effort has benefited from immense input from Japanese companies and individuals, as well as from the national and local governments. Here are some examples of entrepreneurial ventures that are helping to lay a foundation for lasting renewal in the region.

Fruits of Innovation

Abukuma Foods Co., Ltd, a food processor based in Fukushima Prefecture, has achieved an interesting and delicious breakthrough in processing green peaches. The new processing method benefits peach growers by providing a commercial application for fruit that formerly went to waste.

Agriculture occupies a central position in the life of rural Japan, and fortifying the economic viability of Japanese agriculture is therefore indispensable in fostering regional vitality. Japanese farms are small by global standards, placing the farmers at a disadvantage in regard to economies of scale. Farmers and food processors in Japan work to offset that disadvantage through continuing advances in productivity and in product innovation.

New vistas

Abukuma Foods, established in 1972, built a strong position in tsukemono pickled vegetables, a traditional staple in the Japanese diet. Demand for tsukemono has declined, however, amid changes in Japanese eating habits. Abukuma Foods was therefore in need of a new source of revenue. What fulfilled that need was a crop surprisingly close to home, Fukushima Prefecture accounts for more than 20% of Japan’s peach production, second only to Yamashita Prefecture.

The people at Abukuma Foods took a look at the peach business with an eye to identifying potential for generating new value. They achieved a breakthrough with a processing method for rendering green (unripe) peaches delectably edible.

“Our processing softens the inner flesh,“ explains the company’s vice president, Hidekazu Suzuki, “without causing the intermediate flesh to become overly soft. The processed green peaches add a tasty and fun touch to confectionery, to beverages, and to other gourmet delights. Even their seeds are soft, so diners can chew and swallow the peaches whole. The result is something completely different from ‘green’ or ‘unripe’ peaches. So I named our new product Baby Peach.’

Peach growers thin the green fruit on their trees to allow the remaining peaches to grow large and juicy. Traditionally, they have simply discarded the unripe peaches picked in the thinning, since the green fruit are hard and inedible as is. Abukuma Foods’ patented processing technology brings the peaches to an optimal and consistent softness.

A wake-up call

By broadening the market for peaches, Abukuma Foods has reinforced the foundation of the prefecture’s agriculture. Especially welcome among Fukushima’s peach growers is the timeliness of Abukuma Foods’ purchasing of the unripe fruit: late May to early June, when the growers’ chronically strained cash flow has traditionally been especially tight.

No sooner had Abukuma Foods developed the new processing technology than Fukushima experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake, the subsequent tsunami, and the resultant disaster at a nuclear power plant in the prefecture.

“The disaster was a wake-up call,” says Abukuma Foods’ Suzuki. “Our business had suffered a serious blow, and the outlook was uncertain. But that prompted us to look beyond Japan for possibilities. The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) provided introductions, and we have won spots on restaurant menus in Germany, Hong Kong, Spain, and the United Kingdom.”

“Employment at our plant has expanded dramatically,” glows Suzuki. “And we look forward to contributing to further growth in Fukushima agriculture.”

Fashionable Sustainability

Takako Mitalari wanted to contribute to the recovery effort in Japan’s northeast through a sustainable business enterprise. Her solution is a remarkable company that has garnered a nationwide clientele with fashionable woolen wear.

Mitalari launched her knitting project in 2012 in the coastal city of Kesennuma, Miyagi, and incorporated it in 2013. Her knitters, who now number 34, turn out cardigans and sweaters that eager buyers queue to purchase at high-fashion prices.

Some of the knitters have been knitting since they were children. All of them experienced the horror of the March 11, 2011, earthquake and tsunami. Some lost loved ones. Some lost their homes or workplaces. Knitting has been an opportunity to heal and reconnect with the world.

“The city’s connection with the world came as a surprise to me,” says Mitalari. “Kesennuma is a small city. But it’s the port for a deep-sea fishing fleet, so the men in that fleet travel the world. And that has invaded the city with a cosmopolitan air.”

Kesennuma’s fishing tradition, Mitalari learned, also engendered a knitting connection. Mending fishing nets is part of life for fishermen and for their wives and daughters. But Mitalari has provided the women at her company with more than just jobs in a familiar line of work. “We wanted to invest in the women’s lives,” she explains, “with joy and dignity. That has shaped our activity from Day One.”

Mitalari went to work at the global business consultancy McKinsey & Co. on graduating from the University of Tokyo in 2008. She took a year off in 2010 to assist the Bhutanese government in developing sustainable tourism. Back at McKinsey, she received a life-changing career proposal.

Shigehito Ito, a prominent advertising copywriter, became acquainted with Mitalari through a blog that she maintained while in Bhutan. And he enlisted her to lead a project that he had conceived to contribute to post-quake recovery.

“We were determined,” explains Mitalari, “to do something based in local culture and history.” Kesennuma’s fishing and knitting traditions called to mind the woolen sweaters of Ireland’s Aran Islands, and Mitalari flew to Ireland to observe the islands’ knitting industry firsthand.

First come, first served

On returning to Japan, Mitalari began recruiting Kesennuma women for her enterprise. All were able knitters, though few had any professional knitting experience. The city’s fishing industry was reeling from the aftereffects of the earthquake, so the incomes from Kesennuma Knitting was invaluable to the women’s households.

Mitalari knew that viable pricing would be crucial to fiscal sustainability. So she opted for products that could command prices as high-and-fashion apparel, not just handicrafts. A noted hand-knitting designer, Mariko Mukiwada, was an acquaintance of Mitalari’s, and Mukiwada designed Kesennuma Knitting’s inaugural product, a cardigan.
For the Children
The future of the children weighed on Takashi Tachibana’s mind after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Tachibana translated his concern into the delivery of 100,000 meals to schools and evacuation centers in the affected areas. And he has since engineered a platform in a tsunami-devastated village for enriching the education of children from near and far and for hosting corporate retreats.

Tachibana launched his project in the Miyagi Prefecture village of Oga-toshi, where fishermen have long harvested scallops, oysters, and salmon. Forestry and farming are also important livelihoods. And local authorities account for 90% of Japan’s domestically produced salt, but the tsunami of 2011 nearly erased the village from the map.

“What was Oga-toshi is a reminder,” says Tachibana, “of what happened in the disaster. The tsunami claimed about 250 lives there and washed away 80% of the homes and other buildings in the village. Only about 1,000 people remain—less than one-fourth the population before the tsunami.”

Tachibana, a native of Sendai, Miyagi, joined the trading house Itochu Corporation in Tokyo on graduating from Tohoku University in 1994. He handled foodstuff duties and left in 2000 to set up his own distribution company for food products. Tachibana rushed to Miyagi after the 2011 tsunami to check on his family and ended up throwing himself into the relief effort.

Hands-on, real-world experience
Participating in the relief effort occasioned an encounter with a junior high school in Oga-toshi. Tachibana essentially adopted the community, providing support to the school and leading the refurbishment of a long-abandoned school building in the village. The refurbished school building has become a platform for children’s educational programs and also for corporate retreats and for university study sessions.

“A school building,” reflects Tachibana, “serves generations of students and teachers. It’s like a repository for the soul of a community. So closing a school robs a community of its soul. Children leave to attend school and don’t return. The population declines, and no one is left to bear children to reverse the decline. I want to arrest that trend and restore vitality to communities.”

Tachibana christened his platform Moriumius, an allusion to the Japanese words for “forest” (morii), “sea” (umii), and “tomorrow” (asu) and to the English “us.” Visitors gain hands-on experience with work behind the abalone, commercial fishing, forestry, and farming. Among the corporate guests have been such household names as Google and Salesforce.

The interchange with visitors of all ages is occasioning a resurgence in Oga-toshi’s primary Industries. And it is occasioning new possibilities in traditional lines of work. An example is oysters. Tachibana has spearheaded the development of new oyster beds in the city of Oga-toshi.

“Oyster beds ordinarily take years to come into production,” Tachibana explains. “But our new ones started yielding oysters on a commercial basis in the second year. And they’re delicious! We’ll be taking our oysters to New York this later year to promote them through restaurants there.”

Creative input
Moriumius has hosted some 4,000 schoolchildren and about 2,500 corporate and university visitors. Tachibana’s vision begins with garnering attention in Japan, attracting volunteers to build the platform, and becoming a model for other Japanese initiatives. Having attained those goals, Moriumius moves into the next phase of Tachibana’s mission: garner attention internationally and become a model for initiatives worldwide.

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Mobilizing for Regional and Demographic Vitality
The Japanese government adopted a slate of measures in December 2014 for increasing the appeal of regional towns and cities. And the government is urging Japan’s prefectures, cities, and towns to draft local action plans by March 2016 for the same purpose. It sponsored a series of forums across Japan from January to March this year to promote the action planning. The forums took place in each of nine geographical blocs that cover the entire nation. Typical of the forums was one held in the city of Akita on February 4.

The Akita forum was for the Tohoku geographic bloc, which comprises the prefectures of Akita, Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate, Miyagi, and Yamagata. Delving the keynote address there was Masaaki Taira, who represents a Tokyo-based House of Representatives and who serves in the Abe government as a state minister of the Cabinet Office.

Appealing work
Taira touted the success of the Abe government’s package of economic stimulus. He offered as examples the upturns in corporate earnings and in equity prices. Taira acknowledged concerns, however, that rural communities and small companies have not benefited as much from “Abenomics” as Japan’s big cities and big corporations have. He pointed to demographics as the chief issue in that differential.

“Our program for regional revitalization,” declared Taira, “is about breaking out of the vicious circle of population decline and economic stagnation.” He emphasized especially the need for new approaches to designing work.

“The biggest employers across Japan today,” observed Taira, “are service-sector industries. So those industries warrant careful attention in measures for promoting regional vitality. We also need to devote careful attention to primary industries, such as farming, fishery, and forestry, and to tourism. For those industries play a huge role in maximizing the value of regions’ basic resources.”

“Simply generating jobs,” Taira cautioned, “is insufficient. The aim is to keep up the employment and the cost of living in a community. Employers in all of these, he stressed,” needed “to offer work that is appealing in the light of contemporary values.”

Regional vitality hinges, meanwhile, on attracting each region’s resources in ways that are appealing to people elsewhere, that will attract visitors and residents. Tourism promotion is therefore especially important. Promoting tourism is an opportunity for reaffirming regions’ fundamental appeal and for reasserting that appeal to attract visitors from elsewhere in Japan and from overseas.

Taira noted the declining viability of Japan’s traditional approach of fostering economic growth through public works spending. He called for stepped-up attention to fiscal sustainability in designing regional business models.

Counterriveting approaches
The forum segued from Taira’s keynote address into a panel discussion among five entrepreneurs from different industrial sectors. Among them was Shu Katuka, who heads a travel promotion firm in Aomori Prefecture. And it was Katuka’s job to argue for the benefit of rural revitalization. Employers in all of these, he stressed,” needed “to offer work that is appealing in the light of contemporary values.”

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Young People Look Beyond the City

Japan’s heartland is luring a growing number of people young and youngish, Japanese and non-Japanese. Some of the emigrants to rural Japan are trying their hands at entreprenurial and occupational opportunities. Some are enrolling at the university campuses that are springing up across the landscape. And some are simply looking to experience the “real Japan.” Here is a look at some business, community, and educational undertakings that are drawing people to non-urban settings in the nation.

Global University Transforms Japanese Higher Education

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), established in Beppu, Oita, in 2000, has become Japan’s most international university. Nearly half of APU’s more than 5,000 students are from overseas, hailing from some 90 nations. And the faculty is equally international. About 90 of the university’s approximately 170 faculty members are from 24 nations other than Japan.

Everything here is different but not strange,” remarks an Australian student at APU. The Ritsumeikan Trust, which runs Kyoto’s Ritsumeikan University, established APU with the support of Beppu City and Oita Prefecture. APU operates as an autonomous university dedicated to propagating the ideas of freedom, peace, and humanity; to fostering mutual understanding; and to articulating a promising future for the Asia-Pacific region.

Beppu, renowned for its hot springs, and Oita provided the scenic site for the APU campus. And the city has proved a gracious host. The result is an ideal example of academic-government-community cooperation.

“APU is a home away from home for the students and faculty,” explains the university’s president, Shun Korenaga. “That’s a tribute to sensitive interaction among the local governments, the host community, and the university. And that kind of interaction is a key to nurturing regional vitality.”

More than 12,000 individuals from 134 nations have graduated from APU. They exercise the cosmopolitan insights that they gained at the university through work at international organizations, government agencies, educational institutions, and private-sector companies. Some of the international students remain in Japan after graduating to work at Japanese corporations.

Forums Explore Keys to Community Self-Sufficiency

The Japanese government recently convened nine forums across Japan to promote its action plan for nurturing regional vitality. Held from January to March, the forums took place in nine geographical blocks that cover the entire nation. Here are some insights from the keynotes delivered at the forums held in Kumamoto on January 25 and in Komatsu ( Ishikawa Prefecture) on February 22. The Kumamoto forum was for the most southerly of the nine blocks, Kyushu and Okinawa, and the Komatsu forum was for the Hokuriku block: Fukui, Ishikawa, Niigata, and Toyama Prefectures.

A sense of urgency Delivered the keynote remarks at the Kumamoto forum was Shigeki Ishiba, a member of Japan’s lower house of parliament and the APU president in charge of regional revitalization. Ishiba alluded to initiatives by previous Japanese governments to reshape the relationship between Japan’s national and local governments and between the government and private sectors. “That’s different this time,” he said, “is the sense of urgency.”

Previous initiatives for tackling structural reform took place amid demographic and economic growth. In contrast, the APU government’s program for fostering regional vitality is unfolding amid population shrinkage and aging and amid a structural slowdown in economic growth.

“Reinvigorating the region,” declared Ishiba, “means revitalizing Japan. . . . The future of the nation is on the line.”

Big data The keynote speaker at the Komatsu forum was Tatsuya Ito, also a member of Japan’s lower house of parliament and a special advisor to the minister in charge of regional revitalization. Ito outlined threefold assistance available from the national government to assist prefectoral and municipal governments in drafting regional revitalization plans.

We will help the drafting of regional revitalization plans,” Ito said. “We will help with the drafting of regional revitalization plans needed and by deploying officials in the different ministries to provide support to the local governments. And we will furnish useful information.”

The information support is especially promising. Through a service scheduled to start in April, prefectoral and municipal officials will be able to tap public- and private-sector “big data” to analyze demographics, corporate activity, and tourism trends.

“Our service,” explained Ito, “will support strategic planning based on objective data. You’ll be able to visualize changes, for example, to assess the composition of your population by age and gender out to 2040. Industrial mapping, meanwhile, will reveal patterns in corporate transactions by sector. We are counting on a broad range of citizens to get involved,” continued Ito, “in the planning. People need to develop a shared awareness of common issues and a consensus about measures for tackling those issues. And clear-cut approaches based on data will help elicit community participation.”