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Loneliness in Aso: Community-building against ageing, depopulation and pandemic influences

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown worldwide that some groups of people are more vulnerable than others in times of crisis. There is no doubt that the restrictions due to the pandemic, such as social distancing and isolation, have a negative impact on people's mental and physical health, causing problems such as depression and social withdrawal (Stickley / Ueda 2022, 1). As a result, research on loneliness and its implications for health and the social sphere has increased significantly, leading to a growing number of policies aimed at combating this problem and its root causes.

Inagaki et al. define loneliness as a “distressing state indicating that one's basic need for social connection is not being met” (2016, 1096). However, loneliness is not only a problem that affects individuals; it can also characterise communities which lack social connections between people. This is particularly relevant in the context of rural Japan, where the ageing of the population and urbanisation have placed strain on the sustainability and health of local communities (Lützeler et al. 2020, 1–3). Elderly residents living alone are likely to have a less-developed social network than younger people, and mobility problems may further limit their options for social participation (see WHO 2021). Another important issue in the context of the pandemic is the lack of digital literacy among the elderly, which has resulted in a widening of the digital gap.

Based on the thesis that loneliness is increasing in the Aso region, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of the shrinking and ageing population, we developed our research questions for this project. This study aims to visualise Aso as a field where issues typical of rural Japan intersect with the newer challenges posed by the pandemic. If loneliness is perceived as a problem, we aim to identify what kind of activities, measures and initi-

atives exist to counteract it. We also wish to discover more about the influence of the pandemic on social participation and community activities and how the various actors may be attempting to deal with this additional challenge. During most of our research process we worked with an understanding of loneliness as a lack of social connections and—applying this to communities—a lack of social participation and social cohesion. There is often a failure to acknowledge loneliness in this sense, due to it being perceived as an individual problem and a personal “feeling” that one has to deal with oneself rather than an issue that affects society as a whole. The links between social participation, isolation and loneliness have been thoroughly demonstrated by Ge et al. (2022), who outline the crucial function of social participation in preventing conditions that foster loneliness and other health-related problems:

Social participation among older adults directly increases social interactions which has the potential to reduce cognitive decline, lowers the risk of depression, and creates a sense of belonging which alleviate[s ...] loneliness. (Ge et al. 2022, 7)

Our research focuses on social participation as one of the main instruments for combating loneliness on a socio-political level, rather than investigating matters of health. In this way we aim to highlight not only crucial issues that rural Japanese areas face today, but also positive aspects, such as the ability of regions and communities to combat these problems.

In addition to sources such as geographic, demographic and historical data, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews with stakeholders directly or indirectly involved with the provision of social welfare in the Aso region, specifically in *Aso-shi*, *Takamori-machi* and *Nishihara-mura*. The stakeholders ranged from politicians and representatives of the local social welfare council (*shakai fukushi kyōgikai*) to a former leader of a neighbourhood group (*kumi*). Using the qualitative data analysis system MAXQDA, we developed our codes and themes flexibly, applying the Thematic Analysis approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Literature review

Our topic can be divided into two partly overlapping fields of research. Firstly, there are the factors which threaten, restrict and obstruct social participation in Aso and therefore potentially foster loneliness. Here we have identified the ageing and shrinking of the population as long-term trends and the COVID-19 pandemic as an acute issue affecting the community’s social cohesion and in-

dividual resident's social participation. Secondly, we investigated the actors actively engaged in fighting the aforementioned problems through preventive activities, policies, and various initiatives against loneliness, which often involve the stimulation of social participation.

Numerous researchers have pointed out the significant long-term risks posed by rural decline for the provision of health care and social welfare in regional communities, as well as related issues, such as the increasing number of elderly people living alone (*hitorigurashi kōreisha*) (Lützeler et al. 2020; Miserka 2020; Haddad 2011). According to data provided by the municipalities of the three regions we examined, their respective ageing rates exceed the national average of 28.9% (Statistical Handbook of Japan 2022). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines ageing rate as the proportion of a society's population comprising those aged 65 and above (2020). Although Nishihara-*mura* has experienced a slight population increase due to its proximity to the metropolitan area of Kumamoto-*shi* and important transport links such as Kumamoto Airport, its ageing rate is still 32.3%. The populations of Takamori-*machi* and Aso-*shi* are both shrinking rapidly with aging rates around 40%—they are officially classified as depopulated areas (*kaso chiiki*) and thus targets of government-sponsored revitalisation programmes (e.g., the Chiiki okoshi kyōrokutai programme; see Deveci et al. in this volume).

Although studies investigating the influence of COVID-19 on social participation and loneliness in rural communities have been increasing (Ōta et al. 2021; Jewett et al. 2021; Rezaeipandari et al. 2020), the issue is still relatively new and its—mostly problematic—long-term effects are only slowly unfolding. Thus, there is a need for further research on this topic, especially focusing on the impact of the pandemic on already existing problems. For instance, Ōta et al. conducted a study on *osekkai*, a term usually translated as “meddling” or “interference”. In the context of their study, it is explained as “helping culture” (2021, 1) and refers to monthly meetings, exchanges and the linking of residents in a particular region. The study is specifically concerned with the reconstruction of social relations in rural Japan and suggests they have been severely affected by the pandemic. The authors conclude that community activities have been able to increase people's social participation, and that participants met and socialised more frequently and felt more involved in the community as a result (Ōta et al. 2021, 1).

Despite growing interest in this topic, there is little consensus among researchers on who is most affected. Loneliness and social isolation are hard to measure and the approaches and tools for assessment vary greatly, as there

is no standard method, either internationally or nationally. According to a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO), there is no agreement about whether factors such as age and gender create an increased risk for loneliness (2021, 3). A brief examination of studies on loneliness in Japan illustrates this lack of consensus. While Khan and Kadoya (2021) conclude that older people (both men and women) with higher incomes and young women were particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, Stickley and Ueda (2022) argue that the main factors contributing to a higher risk were being young, male and socioeconomically disadvantaged. There does, however, appear to be agreement on the prevalence of loneliness among people living in long-term care institutions compared to those living in the community (WHO 2021, 3; Schofield 2021).

In order to understand the situation in Aso, the efforts of various actors, activities, initiatives, policies and measures aimed at combating loneliness and promoting social participation need to be investigated. To assess this rather complex topic, a simple distinction between state actors and civil society is insufficient as demonstrated by Haddad (2011) in her application of the state-in-society approach to the Japanese social welfare regime. In Japan, the government has long cooperated with non-profit actors for the provision of welfare, creating closely intertwined and mutually beneficial relations (Haddad 2011, 39). Local volunteer groups have been an important part of the Japanese social welfare system since the beginning of the twentieth century (Hastings 1995, 18–23), and the relationship between the Japanese government and such groups is more a partnership than a top-down hierarchy (Rosario 2009, 314). In 1998, the implementation of the Special Non-Profit Organisation Law (NPO Law) led to a massive increase in the number of groups providing local social welfare services (Haddad 2011, 43). The government assists these voluntary organisations both administratively and financially and encourages local communities to form such groups (Haddad 2011, 40). In Aso, the existence of such government-guided volunteer organisations means that a strict separation between the spheres of state and civil society cannot be made when analysing policy-making processes.

A central role within the institutions in Aso and other rural areas is played by local social welfare councils known as *shakai fukushi kyōgikai* (hereafter *shakyō*). Haddad describes these councils as “quasi-governmental associations that brought city officials together with community leaders concerned with social welfare issues” (2011, 35). They are established in every administrative district across Japan, including Nishihara-*mura*, Aso-*shi* and Taka-

mori-machi, the targets of our research (Zenshakyō n.d.a). Typically, their members are representatives of the local authorities, neighbourhood associations and registered volunteer groups (Haddad 2011, 35). In addition, the government appoints private individuals as social welfare commissioners (*minsei iin*) for every administrative district in the country (Kōseirōdōshō n.d.a), who help to communicate the needs and concerns of the community and its individual members to local authorities. Hashimoto and Takahashi describe *minsei iin* as a “link between the local administrative authority, social welfare institutions and residents” (1997, 303), exemplifying the blurred boundaries between public, private and voluntary work in Japan (see Estévez-Abe 2003).

The *shakyō* initiates, coordinates and supports activities on the municipal level and below. Initiatives launched by the *shakyō* are often supported by volunteers from within the community, who receive training and often resources. The aim is that eventually the volunteers, and thus the community itself, will start to carry out the activities autonomously (Zenshakyō n.d.b). The role of the *minsei iin* is clearly defined by the Civil Affairs Committee Law and mainly involves providing social welfare institutions with advice and information. In order to do this, they carry out *mimamori* (watching over, guarding) activities, which consist mainly of home visits to assess the living conditions, needs and concerns of residents (Kōseirōdōshō n.d.b). Generally speaking, the *shakyō* focuses on collective activities while *minsei iin*, aside from their coordinating function, provide individual services through their home visits.

Another potentially important strategy against loneliness (especially among older adults) is the establishment of community clubs known as *fureai ikiiki salon* (gatherings for lively mutual connection). The Japanese term *fureai* describes connectedness between two or more people, while *ikiiki* conveys a sense of liveliness and vigor. At these “salons”, local residents (mostly elderly people) can engage with each other on a regular basis (monthly or in some cases weekly) and build a sense of community through playing games, drinking tea or partaking in sport and cultural activities together (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 100–1). All salons are private, non-profit-making operations run by residents, volunteers and sometimes other relevant organisations. Some are set up independently by residents, while others are supported and organised by the local *shakyō* (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 100). *Fureai salon* can be found in communities throughout Japan, and the Aso region boasts a comprehensive network.

Given these blurred boundaries between public, private and voluntary work, we investigate the actors involved in social welfare provision in Aso based on their organisational and historical background, their purpose, role and tasks. The aforementioned link between loneliness and social participation is an important factor for our research to understand why and how these organisations have acted and what initiatives they have set up. To assess their mutual interdependence, we apply the state-in-society approach presented by Haddad (2011) and aim to show how the priorities and approaches of the actors, as well as their interdependencies, have changed during the pandemic. We also highlight possible future strategies that are being developed in the fight against loneliness.

Awareness, flexibility and cooperation: Solutions to intensifying issues?

In Aso, the two main problems that are currently perceived as threatening and restricting social participation are the long-standing issues of ageing and depopulation and the recent pandemic restrictions. Both of these weaken social cohesion and ultimately lead to increased loneliness with all its negative impacts. Due to the pandemic and social distancing, there have been significant changes in interaction between the actors and the community, the actors amongst themselves, and the members of the community. All our interview partners voiced similar concerns about the cancellation of social activities and gatherings since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. Various stakeholders confirmed that there has been a considerable rise in loneliness during the last years:

Because of this [the cancellation of social activities and gatherings], there are people who cannot have errands done and cannot talk with others, so yes, there are a lot of people who are lonely, who have become lonely. (Interview with Nishihara Shakyō 2022)

Due to governmental social distancing recommendations, opportunities for individuals to engage in social interaction have been severely limited. This particularly affects rural areas in Aso, as the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing trends in the region. As a consequence, we noted an increase in institutional dependency based on various observations, including a significant increase in consultation requests addressed to the *shakyō* and its sub-organisations, and more people appearing to feel they have to “give up” their

independence and enter care institutions. The *shakyō* representatives also explained that they have noticed a marked increase in the number of people who are “considering” entering these institutions. This emphasises the importance of the *fureai salon* which offer supplementary activities to professional care which is part of the national care insurance scheme (e.g., care institutions) and fulfil a preventive role in care dependency.

All actors appear to be reacting to the new developments by shifting their strategic focus and adapting existing policies as well as creating new ones. While bearing in mind that institutions are geared to raising their profile, the *shakyō* has intensified its efforts in gathering and sharing information through cooperation with its sub-organisations and other actors like the *minsei iin*. However, as a result of the pandemic, it is not only community events that have been disrupted or suspended, but also meetings and training of actors involved in social welfare such as the *minsei iin* and new volunteers. This led us to identify individual *mimamori* activities (monitoring fellow members of a community) as the most important tool against loneliness during the present pandemic. Due to the need to adapt to COVID-19 preventive measures, interactions with and between residents on an individual level gained importance as larger gatherings became problematic. These activities aimed at the individual are mainly performed by *minsei iin* and volunteers, but some are carried out directly by the *shakyō*, e.g., their mini day services (*mini dei sabisu*; activities similar to salons but organised solely by the *shakyō*).

In addition, we found a high level of awareness and concern among social welfare actors and stakeholders in Aso regarding the long-term effects of both the pandemic and population decline on community activities, as well as on financial and psychological issues. One *shakyō* representative was concerned that these developments might inflict lasting damage on the social structure:

It hasn't been possible to hold festivals and other events [...] The opportunities for such gatherings have been decreasing. Because of that, seeing people's faces and knowing whether the other person is doing fine or not, those kinds of relationships have been getting weaker. If this goes on longer, a third or a fourth year, I'm worried that people will give up organising such gatherings and that they might disappear completely. (Interview with Aso Shakyō 2022)

Beyond that, we were able to observe tensions between the local government and other key actors in the organisation of community activities. Being closely affiliated with the government, *shakyō* representatives expressed a sense of

“not really being able to act” (*nakanaka ugokenai*), as they have to closely follow government guidelines regarding the pandemic (Interview with Nishi-hara Shakyō 2022). However, local volunteer associations and ward mayors have urged the necessity for autonomous decisions to be made concerning community activities, as after more than two years of the pandemic they feel that the need for human contact that such activities provide should be increasingly prioritised over the fear of possible criticism and social condemnation.

Regarding the structure of the actors involved in social welfare in Aso, we found that they are organised as a complex cooperative network intent on promoting social participation in the community despite the current challenges. Each *shakyō* assumes a key role as a connector, raising awareness and cooperation among the village-structured communities and other state actors (local governments), semi-state actors (social welfare institutions, sub-organisations, *minsei iin*) and non-state actors (volunteers, NPOs). They are responsible for information gathering, the coordination and guidance of local groups and the financial distribution of government funds.

Network cooperation is an essential factor in developing and promoting community activities, and it defines the relationships of actors with each other and the community. One example of a network system established for official social welfare organisations in Aso is the Yamabiko Network, which is a platform on which all seven municipal councils of social welfare in the Aso region have been promoting cooperation (*tasukeai*) and support (*sasaeai*) since 1997 based on the concept of the “Aso Block” (Aso *burokku shakyō*). With the overall aim of increasing social exchange and collaboration in the social welfare system, the municipal councils encourage people to pay attention to individual members of a community, focusing on the most vulnerable groups (from the *shakyō*’s perspective): the elderly, children and people with disabilities (Aso *burokku shakai fukushi kyōgikai rengōkai* 2022). Their success in making people more aware in their everyday lives of being part of a community is one of the main reasons they cite for Aso’s outstanding track record in managing natural disasters such as the Kumamoto earthquake in 2016.

Discussion

Our research confirms that organised community-building activities in Aso—discussion meetings, salon activities and smaller neighbourhood “helping” services to name but a few—serve the two main purposes observed by Miyake and Iseki (2014): Firstly, they aim to increase social participation and strengthen the community through encouraging interaction between res-

idents, volunteers and local organisations. Such interaction targets the reduction of loneliness and isolation, increasing the exchange of information within and between regional communities, while also monitoring the health of members of the community and providing them with opportunities for physical and mental exercise. These practices thus effectively tackle a range of social issues in local communities through utilising and prioritising human bonds (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 102). Secondly, their purpose is to create a framework in which the organised community activities function as a base for developing a resident-led community welfare system (Miyake / Iseki 2014). In Aso, the monthly meetings (weekly in some parts of Nishihara-*mura*) include health-related activities such as light fitness exercises and dietary advice, as well as cultural and educational events. The types of activities that are held depend on the needs of the local community and target different groups (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 102).

The various actors involved in providing social welfare in Aso appear to move in a constant state of tension between government control and self-determination. Making the transition from a civil organisation to an NPO eligible to receive government funds can result in less autonomy when it comes to policy making. Volunteer groups tend to enjoy greater flexibility as they are independent of government structures but often have less means and resources to draw upon to offer their services (Haddad 2011, 37–9). In this regard, we observed great variation between the different regions and organisations in Aso. For example, the *fureai salon* in Nishihara-*mura* work more closely with the *shakyō* and follow government guidelines more strictly than their counterparts in Aso-*shi* or Takamori-*machi*. They also report regularly to the *shakyō*. Consequently, it has been more difficult for them to adapt to the pandemic, as they were forced to suspend their activities due to government-imposed social distancing measures.

Another key issue in the context of the pandemic is the lack of digital literacy among the elderly, which excludes them from an increasingly important alternative to face-to-face communication. This results in a widening of the digital gap. During the pandemic, much of the interpersonal interaction worldwide was relocated to the online sphere, including professional social welfare services as well as work and everyday communication with family and friends. Residents of communities in rural regions—Aso being no exception—are particularly affected by the digital divide, as their use of online communication during the pandemic has been much more limited than that of, for instance, younger residents in urban regions. According to representa-

tives of the Takamori-*machi* and Aso-*shi shakyō*, this is the result of a lack of digital literacy rather than any problem with the internet infrastructure. This is also another possible reason why face-to-face *mimamori* activities have gained in relevance.

To conclude, activities to prevent loneliness in the Aso region can be understood as a combined response to the long-term social challenges in rural Japan and the acute needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Network structures enable cooperation and allow for a more efficient provision of social welfare to the residents of a certain region or community. Haddad describes the expansion of networking among social welfare service providers as “one of the greatest areas of innovation” (2011, 41), as it brings together ideas from a diverse range of groups. It also ensures different channels of communication (organisers, volunteers, residents themselves) with the people in need of their services and makes implementation easier as representatives of all the relevant groups are involved, thus creating a shared sense of responsibility (Haddad 2011, 42–3). By exploring the organisational network in Aso, it has become evident that close cooperation and communication between the actors are key factors in dealing with the pressing issues, of which loneliness is undoubtedly a central problem.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted not only loneliness in Aso but also the actors engaged in activities to combat it. The role of intermediaries like the *minsei iin* has gained in importance as emphasis was shifted to individual visits rather than social gatherings due to the lower risk of infection. Our research shows that actors adapted to the new situation created by the pandemic by focusing on existing activities such as *mimamori* and mini day services which could be maintained despite COVID-19 restrictions, while also strengthening their cooperation with other organisations, initiatives and the community. Finally, we concluded from our research that these adaptations were a key factor in keeping the social welfare system functioning in the face of increasing pressure during the pandemic. The developments observed during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate the importance of continuously thinking of new approaches, adapting existing ones and switching emphasis between activities to the ones that most effectively enable social workers and volunteers to engage with the ever-changing challenges associated with the problem of loneliness.

Reflections on the project

Being part of this research project was overall a great experience. In the initial preparatory part during the previous semester, as is often the case at the very beginning of a research project, we were not sure where it was going to lead. However, the closer we got to the end of the semester and the hands-on excursion part of the project, the more we came out of our shell and felt that we could actually contribute. As the Aso project has been going on for many years at our department, it seemed at first like an overwhelmingly massive and intangible undertaking. However, thanks to the guidance of our lecturers and everybody's help and support it appeared increasingly manageable, and our project started to take shape. During the virtual excursion itself, we had various opportunities to become familiar with methodical fieldwork skills like conducting interviews and applying the knowledge we had acquired in the preparatory phase to dig deeper into our topic of interest. During that process, we also got to know each other better and learned about our strengths and weaknesses, which helped immensely in overcoming the challenges we faced in dealing with this type of project. Some group members were good at managing and filtering data, some were good at coming up with creative ideas, while others were good at making the best use of the available technology and other resources. One of our member's strength was on the linguistic side, which is why his responsibilities lay mostly with translation, reading Japanese texts for our research and taking care of email exchange with our contacts in Japan. While he believes he was able to do that reasonably well, he would have had a hard time without his partner Katja, who was the actual leader of the operation. Especially during interviews, it helped to have her organise our data so that the other member could focus on what he and our interview partners said. If we had not worked together so well, there would probably have been a few times when we would have asked questions that had already been answered.

While we are sure we would all have preferred face-to-face on-site research in Japan, we believe that online research was a good starting point for us as student researchers. Despite that, there were of course many problems that we had to face. One major limitation of our online research was gaining access to people in the region, especially the elderly people who are directly affected by the developments we were investigating. Most of them are not proficient in using online communication tools or the internet and computers in general. Another problem is that due to the lack of any personal interaction beforehand they may have been worried about not being able to

communicate properly. All they would have known about us is that we are not Japanese, which often leads to the presumption that we do not speak Japanese well, if at all. If we had been able to meet them face to face, it would have been easier to create an environment of mutual trust conducive to personal interaction and we could have more easily reassured them that there was no need to be nervous or to worry about wasting our time—which seemed to be an occurring issue. Despite all these challenges, there were aspects of online research that were helpful. Because of the virtual barrier between us and our interview partners, we were able to coordinate ourselves and our questions more easily without our in-group communication interfering with the flow of the interviews. We believe another advantage was that our interview partners were more comfortable with having their video recorded as we were already using video communications as our tool for the interview, whereas otherwise they might have only been comfortable with an audio recording or might have requested no recording at all.

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