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Overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned from joining a group project in times of turbulence

My time working on a policy-oriented sub-project within an inter-disciplinary group project in the time of COVID-19, both as a research assistant and a PhD student, has been a journey full of learning opportunities. As part of Cornelia Reiher's research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan", my sub-project seeks to explicate how Japanese core policy actors envision, formulate, implement and assess rural revitalisation policies from a comparative perspective. With this focus on the political and policy aspects of rural revitalisation, I aim to complement the anthropological focus pursued by other group members who are concentrating more on the beneficiaries of revitalisation policies, e.g., migrants and local residents. For this qualitative and inter-disciplinary group project, all members originally planned to conduct fieldwork in Japan together, sharing data, collaborating closely and learning from each other's expertise. Because this is the first academic and professional project that I have taken part in, I was—and still am—very excited to have the opportunity to contribute to the project and learn from this work experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to our project. It affected our research plans and also lengthened the time it took me to adapt to my new working life in Berlin. Nevertheless, the pandemic also forced us to be flexible in adjusting to an ever-changing situation, which resulted in some unexpected outcomes. Against this backdrop, I would like to share some of the experiences, challenges and lessons learned during my time as a research assistant on the project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan" while trying to finish my own PhD thesis.

Introducing my research project

Out-migration of young people from rural areas to urban centres has been one of the main problems in rural Japan for several decades (Hagihara 1984; Watanabe 2001, 158; Izuta et al. 2016; Okubo et al. 2016; Shiikawa et al. 2019; Hashimoto et al. 2020; Ishikawa 2020). In 2018, the Tōkyō area received ap-

prox. 490,000 people from other parts of the country, more than half of whom were young people (Kumagai 2020, 233). Since large-scale out-migration erodes the social and economic vitality of rural communities (Feldhoff 2013; Wijaya 2013; Takamura et al. 2017; Matsuoka 2018; Ishikawa 2020), policies to attract urban migrants to rural areas have been increasing in importance (Golding / Curtis 2013).

Currently, the Comprehensive Strategy for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalising Local Economy in Japan (*Machi, hito, shigoto, sōsei sōgō senryaku*, hereafter referred to as the Comprehensive Strategy) is the most prominent of these policies and the only comprehensive framework for rural revitalisation. The framework was adopted in 2014 by Shinzo Abe and has been in effect since 2015. The goal of the Comprehensive Strategy is to consolidate all policies and schemes for rural revitalisation under a single holistic framework by eliminating the vertical hierarchy of ministries (Yoshizawa 2019). In addition to the national plans, there are also prefectural and municipal versions of the Comprehensive Strategy that outline four main goals for rural revitalisation, one of which is to "build connections with regions and create a flow of people to regions" (Japanese Government, Cabinet Office 2020). A leading programme that falls under this goal is the Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (COKT), which was initiated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) in 2009. Its main goals are to attract and maintain COKT participants in rural areas in order for these participants to carry out revitalisation activities in their host communities. Like other policies, the COKT initially began as a separate programme but is now part of the Comprehensive Strategy.

My project focuses on the Comprehensive Strategy and the COKT for four reasons. First, the Comprehensive Strategy and the COKT serve as a case study for investigating the Japanese central government's policies for rural revitalisation, along with their underlying concepts and objectives. While often considered a flagship policy framework by Abe, it was initially unclear at the beginning of our project how the Comprehensive Strategy differed substantively from previous revitalisation policies, and if or how schemes such as the COKT might have changed after being incorporated into the Comprehensive Strategy. At the current time of writing, my preliminary findings show that the creation of the Comprehensive Strategy may have been driven by political motives. Some national respondents contended that politicians were pandering to the public and covering up bad political practices (e.g., pork-barrel politics) by formulating "new" revitalisation policies that did not significantly differ from previous ones apart from minor modifications. They pointed

out that new administrations and prime ministers often rebrand pre-existing strategies in their own "policy colours" to create their own flagship policies.

Second, I aim to explore Japan's urban-rural relations by focusing on the Comprehensive Strategy and the COKT. While the Comprehensive Strategy was initially formulated by the central government, it was then revised and adapted to local contexts by prefectural and municipal governments. While some scholars have demonstrated that the local versions of the Comprehensive Strategy differ across municipalities (Nakamura 2015; Hayashi 2015; Kawabata et al. 2017), there is still a dearth of studies explaining how the municipal plans differ from the national and/or prefectural versions, and each other. Furthermore, it is unclear what roles the national, prefectural and municipal governments play in facilitating the Comprehensive Strategy and COKT.

Third, my research will contribute to the scholarship on rural policy actors. Existing studies on Japan's rural development policy tend to analyse rural revitalisation policies from the perspective of municipal non-state actors, such as local residents, migrants, businesses and NGOs (Matsuoka 2018; Ochi 2019; Maruyama 2005; Obikwelu 2018). That said, scholars have shown that in addition to key actors such as politicians and bureaucrats, other proximate actors such as government advisors, lobbyists and policy secretaries are also likely to be able to influence policies (Page 2010; Howlett 2011; Gunn 2017; Ōkubo 2013; Craft / Howlett 2013; Marier 2008; Nekola / Kohoutek 2017). Thus, it is important to understand the beliefs and ideas that policy actors have in relation to a policy problem and also the policy tools they have to tackle the problem (Howlett / Mukherjee 2019; Gunn 2017). Nevertheless, despite their important role in formulating and implementing revitalisation policies, the literature has not explored the views of Japan's national policy actors regarding rural revitalisation policies to the same extent as local actors. Thus, my research seeks to redress this balance by investigating the roles and visions of different groups of rural policy actors (politicians, bureaucrats, advisors, academics and NGO/NPO staff) at the three levels of government and across different localities.

Fourth, my research aims to contribute to the evaluation of rural revitalisation policies in Japan, and more specifically that of the COKT. Scholars note that appraisals of the COKT tend to focus on the scheme's numerical outputs, e.g., the number of participants and rates of settlement (Zushi 2013; Hirai / Soga 2017; Shibazaki / Nakatsuka 2017) and while some such evaluations of the COKT suggest that the scheme has been successful (Zushi 2013; Hirai / Soga 2017; Shibazaki / Nakatsuka 2017), Taguchi argues that revitali-

sation activities should be viewed in terms of quality, rather than quantity or numerical outputs (2018, 10). Other scholars agree that quantity-based evaluation practices are inadequate for explaining unintended effects, stakeholders' perceptions and causal mechanisms, e.g., the factors that determine the actual success of a policy (Chen / Rossi 1989; Chen 1990, 1994, 2012, 2015; Yamaya 2002; Head 2008; Vedung 2012; Zushi 2013; Hayashi 2015; Kotakemori 2016; Sasakawa 2017; Kawabata et al. 2017; Hirai / Soga 2017). There have been some attempts to assess the COKT beyond its numerical outputs. For instance, scholars discuss the importance of having financial support and charismatic leaders (Reiher 2020), the concern that COKT participants are considered little more than servants, and municipal governments not knowing what they should ask participants to do (Zushi 2013; Taguchi 2018). However, these attempts are often single case studies on the municipal level and do not explore the perspectives of national and prefectural actors. My research seeks to address this problem by evaluating the COKT comparatively, focusing on policy actors in Tōkyō (national level), Fukuoka and Nagasaki Prefectures (prefectural level) and Buzen City and Hasami Town (municipal level).

Conducting an academic group project during COVID-19

COVID-19 has disrupted everyday life throughout the world and our research project has been no exception. As with group activities in any other field, I believe being part of an academic research team requires one to be "social", that is, to effectively collaborate with other members. Such effective collaboration takes time to develop, as members need to get to know each other's personalities and working styles and build mutual trust. Our project started on 1 October 2020, only two weeks before Berlin entered its second lockdown, which would last for seven months. Despite being able to schedule some in-person meetings during that short two-week period, we had to communicate remotely for most of our first year. This sudden move to complete e-communication lengthened my learning curve and adaptation process, as it became more difficult to understand each other when expressions and nuances got lost in emails and social cues were obscured behind computer screens. The severity of the winter lockdown made me feel particularly isolated as I had just moved to Berlin for the first time after finishing my MA in Austria and Hungary. The combination of moving to a new country, initial paperwork, a new work environment and the lockdown was indeed challenging. Thus, on the social aspect front, the pandemic has had a significant impact on me personally and also on our team as a whole.

COVID-19 also influenced the academic and professional aspects of our project throughout the first half of our collaboration. One issue was that online communication made it more difficult for me to navigate the academic system in Germany. The German system of research assistantships and doctoral studies differs from the structured PhD programmes prevalent in the US and Japan with which I am familiar. Hence, I was at times confused about my twin roles as a research assistant for our group project and as a PhD student affiliated with the Graduate School of East Asian Studies. Furthermore, as our project follows a qualitative approach, we were supposed to conduct fieldwork in Japan, make contacts and interview research participants in the field. However, I could only enter Japan for my fieldwork in May 2022, almost two years into my project. Needless to say, the situation was highly precarious and challenging for qualitative researchers, including PhD students with limited funding and time. As explained in the introduction, my intended research participants were policy actors, including government officials and politicians. When embarking on my research, I had been concerned that it might be difficult to obtain access to relevant policy actors without knowing their key gatekeepers, and so the prospect of contacting politicians and ministry officials online appeared extremely daunting. For this reason, COVID-19 significantly impacted my mental wellbeing and also the general mood of our team, since we could not be sure when we would be able to conduct our fieldwork and collect the necessary data.

Being flexible during the pandemic

In light of the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibility and adaptability became the mantras for our team. First, my supervisor tried to create some opportunities to improve both our academic development and our social well-being. To prepare us for our research, she asked us to participate in an online research design course in 2020, and she also suggested that I join her MA methods course on interviewing skills during the summer of 2021. As we entered our second year and the lockdown in Berlin was lifted, our team was able to reunite in person and participate in teambuilding activities such as going on field trips, eating out and a digital Christmas party. My supervisor's efforts to create a sense of normality during these unusual times, together with her discipline and determination to carry on with the project, helped to keep me on track and optimistic about my PhD research.

Second, being part of a team has made my research life much more dynamic. It is a great asset to have a research team with whom I can consult

and discuss a vast array of topics, ranging from preliminary findings, interview questions and methods to life plans and philosophy. I find it extremely helpful to have an academic and emotional support system right by my side. Furthermore, our almost-exclusively online meetings in the beginning stages of our teamwork familiarised me with the virtual environment, which would later be crucial for my online interviews with research participants. I have also discovered from my interviews with Japanese policy actors that the ability to work remotely with others is now considered a transferable and important skill even in the post-COVID world.

Since autumn 2021 our online group meetings have transformed into a larger study group to which we invite researchers on rural Japan from around the world to join us every month. In this study group, we present our findings, discuss methodologies and exchange ideas. Other policy-oriented researchers who have joined this group have given me valuable insights. My colleague and I take turns in organising and chairing these study group sessions and we have also presented to the group.

Our team also operates a research blog and receives contributions from academics and practitioners in different languages. For my part, in addition to contributing blog posts, I reach out to practitioners in Japan to ask for their cooperation. My interlocutors have made contributions about rural revitalisation in Japanese and Vietnamese; their posts are then translated into English and published on our blog. This active research blog has proven to be an effective "gatekeeper" in its own right, as it provides me with a credible profile when reaching out to policy actors. Many of my respondents have mentioned that they looked at our blog before our interviews. In addition, our project has been able to connect with a research group on rural Japan from Kyūshū University and has since held several joint virtual meetings. The discussions with researchers from Kyūshū University have enabled me to step out of the "international researchers' bubble" and provided me with an insight into the perspectives of Japanese researchers.

My supervisor also got us involved in writing joint articles and encouraged me to create policy briefs about different rural revitalisation programmes to share with group members. Having been trained in policy analysis during my MA, I have enjoyed applying my policy analysis skills to a real project beyond coursework. All these different activities and advantages would not have been possible if I had chosen an independent PhD programme rather than joining a group project.

Third, the move to digital research due to COVID-19 has resulted in some unexpectedly positive outcomes for our project. While waiting for Japan to reopen, my supervisor suggested that I analyse written policy documents and, more specifically, different versions of the Comprehensive Strategy across three levels of government and localities. As mentioned earlier, one of my project's goals is to investigate the underlying concepts and objectives of Japan's rural revitalisation policies. Originally, I intended to rely solely on interviews to explore this aspect. However, I learned of two qualitative methods, namely "policy content analysis" (Hall / Steiner 2020) and "policy prioritization research" (Gugushvili / Salukvadze 2021), which I was able to use to analyse objectives, intervention logic and priorities. Later, I asked my research participants to comment on my analysis of the plans. For instance, my preliminary findings from analysing versions of the Comphrehensive Strategy showed that the national version has a strong focus on economic and financial measures. At the same time, one of my respondents, a director of what had been the Headquarters for Rural Revitalisation (*chihōsōsei honbu*) in charge of drafting the Comprehensive Strategy, commented that his approach to rural revitalisation was heavily influenced by economics. In this way, my analysis of the written policy documents became another relevant source of data that helped increase the validity of my research. Furthermore, my supervisor's suggestion to analyse the documents gave me a concrete and achievable target to accomplish at a time of great uncertainty, and this work later came to form the first analytical chapter of my thesis. My summaries of the policy documents have also been used as part of a joint paper on support schemes for migrants to Kyūshū.

I also found that I was able to gain access and conduct interviews with some key policy actors via e-communication in a rather more straightforward manner than I had expected. In order to conduct interviews while in Berlin, I tried various ways of reaching out to potential research participants. For instance, I sent introductory emails to the relevant ministerial, prefectural and municipal offices and also directly contacted the division in charge of the COKT at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Most importantly, social media proved to be highly effective as I was able to contact several government advisors and high-ranking bureaucrats via platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. The fact that I was carrying out "fieldwork with participants in Japan" while still based in Berlin meant that I was usually able to consult with my supervisor and colleagues directly after the interviews. Solutions for problems encountered during the interviews, along

with new insights and inspiration often emerged as a result of such consultations. These initial online meetings and connections also provided me with a solid base when I was finally able to travel to Japan in May 2022. The research participants I had interviewed online immediately agreed to meet in person and introduced me to other key policy actors across my field sites. Fortunately, I have been able to interview some key policy actors, including high-ranking government officials and politicians, who are highly relevant for our project. After the interviews, I usually share data with other team members, including interview summaries, transcripts and audios.

Finally, joining a group project has given me ample opportunities to grow as an individual. Working closely with an international team for three years has constantly forced me to continue learning to keep up with work demands and to continue improving my interpersonal skills to collaborate with colleagues. It has also helped me to develop stress-relieving strategies to stay balanced and motivated, and I have learnt to be more flexible and adaptable. Of course, there are obstacles to overcome in all group settings, even more so in the time of COVID-19. However, I believe that all the lessons from these turbulent times have helped me grow both as a young researcher and as a young person.

Summary and conclusion

The time working as a member of the group project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan" while conducting my own PhD research has so far been a journey full of growth opportunities. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on our group project and my sub-project; it completely changed our research plan and cast doubt on our ability to conduct fieldwork and interviews in Japan. All these challenges, together with lengthy lockdowns and social distancing, created significant stress for young researchers, myself included. However, the negative influence of COVID-19 was mitigated thanks to my research team. My supervisor's efforts to regularly bring the whole team together, albeit online, kept me motivated, and the group activities we were able to carry out in the face of precarity provided a sense of normality and stability. Moreover, by belonging to a group project I was able to receive instantaneous advice and consultations on a variety of topics, along with numerous opportunities to develop soft and interpersonal skills as well as research techniques.

The skills and advice I received from my colleagues have enabled me to conduct some fascinating and insightful interviews with policy actors

that have enabled me to discover what they think about Japan's revitalisation policies. For instance, I have found that some policy actors differentiate between the various Japanese terms for rural revitalisation, such as *chiiki kasseika, chiiki-zukuri and chihōsōsei*. They shared with me that *chiiki kasseika* still evokes a negative image of the so-called "pork-barrel politics" prevalent during Japan's high-growth era, when the government overinvested in infrastructure, transportation, and public works in exchange for votes. By contrast, *chihōsōsei* usually refers to the comprehensive policy framework initiated by Shinzo Abe in 2014 and tends to have a more positive connotation of developing regions from within, an approach that resembles Wirth et al.'s (2016) "endogenous development theory". I have also been able to test a hypothesis that our team came up with before my fieldwork that the central government may be unaware of some of the activities conducted in the field. For instance, an official at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications shared with me that the ministry's main role is to finance the COKT programme and that she is in the dark about its efficacy and how it is being implemented by the municipalities. I believe I was able to obtain such insights thanks to consultations with my colleagues, who advised me on whom to interview, what questions to ask and what aspects to focus on.

At the time of writing, I have only three more months left for fieldwork in Japan and one year until my expected graduation. Although the year ahead will be extremely hectic, I am confident that it will also be highly fulfilling due to the academic and emotional support from my colleagues. I very much look forward to contributing more data to our project and finishing my PhD as planned.

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