

An analysis framework proposal for regional revitalization and a policy proposal for Namegata City, Ibaraki Prefecture:

Learning from successful cases

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Abstract

Japanese society is currently concentrated around Tokyo and its population has increased. On the other hand, local areas have been experiencing depopulation. The Japanese government enacted the Regional Revitalization Basic Act, which aims to curb population decline and form a sustainable society through the initiative of local governments, private enterprises, and residents. Therefore, this study focuses on the regional revitalization of Namegata City, Ibaraki Prefecture and mainly focuses on extracting success factors for it. A framework was set for analyzing the practices of individual cities. The framework includes four items: “people,” “local government,” “private company,” and “local resources.” It was applied to three cities: Namegata City in Ibaraki Prefecture, Nagato City in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan and Suzhou City in Jiangsu Province, China. According to the framework analysis, Namegata City has three issues and suggested improvements. Suggestions are “strengthening the hometown tax system,” “reforming the Shiraho hot spring,” and “using containers in various parks.” The framework and suggestions were presented to the mayor of Namegata City and a question-and-answer session was conducted with him. This research will help as one of the methods for the regional revitalization.

Keywords

regional revitalization, SDGs, CSR, framework analysis, problem analysis

1. Introduction

Japan is currently concentrated around Tokyo, and the population has increased despite a general decline in birth-rates and the aging population [Hill and Kim, 2000]. Conversely, local areas far from Kanto have been experiencing depopulation, which has significantly influenced the decrease in population, reduced economic activity, and weakened community vitality. In response, the Japanese government enacted the Regional Revitalization Basic Act [House of Representatives, 2014], which aims to curb population decline and form a sustainable society through the initiative of local governments, private enterprises, and residents. One goal of this legislation is to achieve sustainable community development in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals (hereafter SDGs), which include the environment, gender, and a wide variety of human issues. Some local governments have succeeded in halting the population decline and creating new industries or tourist attractions. In Regensburg, Germany, for example, the government established an industrial cluster centered around universities to strengthen small and medium-sized enterprises and support the creation of high-value-added products, leading Regensburg to be recognized for its economic strength [Forbes Japan, 2017]. In addition, the Netherlands is actively committed to promoting environmental conservation and a sustainable economic model [The United Nations, 2003]. Specifically, a local sharing service, Peerby [2023], allows neighbors to borrow and lend household items. This supports not only start-up companies but also universities and research centers for new

employment and economic growth. These cities succeeded in controlling depopulation because of technological development in the case of Germany and residents in the case of the Netherlands. This highlights the importance of understanding how successful governments and cities overcome depopulation.

Therefore, this study focuses on the regional revitalization of Namegata City, Ibaraki Prefecture. Namegata worked toward depopulation area certification and addressed its need to be an activated town. This study seeks to learn from successful examples while exploring approaches to regional revitalization and methods for encouraging community engagement. It is expected to serve as a model for regional revitalization and as a successful case for depopulated areas, providing insights into effective strategies for combating population decline in rural regions.

2. Literature review

Studies on regional revitalization have adopted many approaches. The first approach to regional revitalization focuses on the development path [Wood and Taylor 2004; Balsas, 2004; Tsujimoto, 2017]. Gao and Wu [2017] discussed the case study of Yuanjia Village, revealing three levels: material, social, and spiritual. It provided useful practical implications regarding rural tourism planners and community planners working for governments. Duxbury and Campbell [2011] present a broad overview of key themes in the literature on cultural development in rural and small communities and explained that research points to different directions as well as issues, dynamics, and strategies that influence development in rural communities. Yang et al. [2021] provided new insights into the touristification of rural communities to promote sustainable

rural development.

The second approach involves creating a regional revitalization framework and applying it to rural regions [Mooner, 2004; Swanstorm, 2008; Mohamad et al., 2017; Koh et al., 2005; Okamura, 2021]. Goals and frameworks are developed by various countries and groups. For example, the European Union identified sustainable agriculture and villages as one of its sustainable development goals [Gheorghe et al., 2022]. Meanwhile, Geng et al. [2023] constructed a new 5E (estate, environment, education, efficacy, and earning) framework with a comprehensive index system. Agarwal et al. [2009] recommended that the five types of capital—economic, human, social, cultural, and environmental—be considered in creating a framework. These allowed rural areas, especially in developing countries, to measure differences in economic performance and socioeconomic status.

The third approach entails data collection and economic impact analysis [Kitchens, 2010; Dennis, 2010; Yamasaki et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2023; Bondonio and Greenbaum, 2014]. García [2004] reviewed cultural policy and planning as urban regeneration tools in western European cities by examining the origin and development of the European City/Capital of Culture program. García offered recommendations for further development within the UK context. Meanwhile, Cowell [2013] explored how two regions—Buffalo (New York) and Cleveland (Ohio)—have used economic development to adapt and respond to deindustrialization. Interviews were conducted and current economic development plans were analyzed to increase understanding of how regions address challenges, how economic development planning shapes these responses, and how both economic development planning and the larger response are linked to adaptive resilience in distressed regions. In addition, Chuang et al. [2021] examined regional revitalization in Keelung Badouzi, Taiwan, by applying social network analysis to explore key driving forces. They found several issues, such as key people within leadership, key industries, key groups, and key activities.

These studies have mainly focused on extracting success

factors for regional revitalization. They also analyzed the practices of individual cities. Therefore, this current study proposes an analytical framework for the success of regional revitalization. This framework is applied to cities in Japan and China, where regional revitalization has been successful, and identifies success factors. By implementing this framework to Namegata City, regional revitalization factors are collected, and a successful policy of strategies is developed.

3. A New regional revitalization framework

Figure 1 illustrates the framework of this research, the design of which focuses on examining the interaction among stakeholders such as residents, local governments, and private companies. The development of an urban city considers a local community, the SDGs, and technology for a smart city and IoT.

As a result, four items exist outside the framework: “people,” “local government,” “private company,” and “local resources.” “People” provides information not only about the locals but also about a population, an area, a culture, a history, and others. “Local government” clarifies local government policy and related activities. “Private company” analyzes industries and the jobs they offer, which creates employment and increases tax revenue. Some industries also attract tourists to their areas and make a huge impact on economic growth. “Local resources” are valuable in activating the city and include heritage places, food, handicrafts, and social events. These involve not only hard historical objects but also soft ones. An example is a social platform for goods that people want to offer and want to use, which is economical and supports environmental goals. These four are stakeholders in the success of regional revitalization.

Items inside the framework are activated to achieve regional revitalization. This study aims to promote “space creation.” To accomplish regional revitalization, three items are considered: “urban development/community activities,” “SDGs/preservation and regeneration,” and “smart city/IoT.” “Urban development/community activities” is an important item to

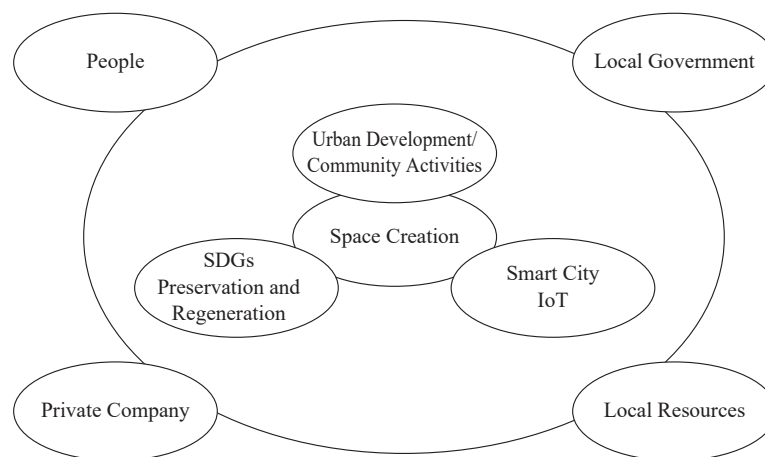


Figure 1: Research framework

foster space, facilitating communication among local people, especially older adults as they are an especially low-income group and experience mobility restrictions [Temelová and Dvořáková, 2012]. Urban development is not only the goal of local governments when creating an urban city. Developing a town for tourists involves everyone, from locals, who will benefit the most, to community development support groups, financial institutions, local commerce and industry departments, real estate companies, and urban development specialists. “SDGs/preservation and regeneration” requires a discussion about all people living on earth to be aware of the SDGs, which will lead to comprehensive and sustainable regional development, and to allow collaboration among various stakeholders, having a common goal to work toward sustainable development. Governments and municipalities can formulate policies and allocate resources to accomplish the SDGs in their respective communities. Companies and residents can also link their activities and contributions to the SDGs to promote collaboration. City development must consider life sustainability, preserve places of heritage, and regenerate nature. “Smart city/IoT” refers to supporting people who need help during emergencies, using a sharing service, and promoting easy access to various services. IoT technology is automatically collected information about regarding who uses, needs, and monitors such services. Other benefits of the introduction of IoT are efficiency and cost reduction. It can be believed that IoT is the most effective way to revitalize rural areas and address local problems.

4. Application: Resolving problems and suggesting improvements for Namegata-shi

4.1 Application to three cities

The three cities applied to Figure 1 are: Nagato City in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan; Suzhou City in Jiangsu Province, China; and Namegata City in Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan. The first two, while extremely rural, are successful cases of regional revitalization. Nagato City increased the number of people related to a tertiary industry, which provides services, tourism, information, etc [Nagato City, 2023]. Similarly, the population of Jiangsu in 2023 was a 3.99 % increase from 2022

[CEIC, 2024]. After an examination of these three cities, the problems of Namegata City will be addressed.

4.1.1 Nagato City, Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan

Nagato City has a population of 31,500 and an area of 357.31 km², comparable with the city of Boston, Massachusetts, USA. It is situated northwest of Yamaguchi Prefecture. It was a famous historical city during the Edo period, called the “*Chōshū* domain.” However, Nagato City is a depopulated area whose population continues to decrease. Its main industries are commercial fishing, agriculture, animal husbandry, and food processing. These are all “local resources” in Figure 1. The charm of Nagato City lies in its iconic feature, a blowfish called “*fugu*,” which has become the face of the city. The city attracts tourists through *fugu*-related attractions. One reason for the increase in tourists is the Nagato government’s partnerships with several companies. These include Hoshino Resorts, five-star hotel resorts; YMFG ZONE Planning, a financial support company; and Hitachi Systems, an IT solution company. The partnership between the Nagato government and Hoshino Resorts has produced the concept titled “Osoto Heaven [Nagato City, 2020].” The rivers and roads in the center of Izumi Street are considered “town courtyards.” This used to be based on the idea that “everyone uses them and everyone takes care of them. It is characterized by the involvement among local people, Hoshino Resorts, and government that they are working together to revitalize the region.” Aiming to become the most interesting hot spring town in Japan, Nagato City has transformed in accordance with Osoto Heaven. The SDGs are constantly pursued and facilitated by Hitachi Systems. Nagato actively addresses issues such as free Wi-Fi throughout the entire city. Because of the increasing number of tourists and tourism consumption, tax payments help increase the city’s tax revenue. Furthermore, in 2020, Nagato received the “Hometown Masterpiece of the Year Regional Revitalization Award” for implementing policies through collaborations between the public and private sectors, showcasing the effectiveness of these initiatives.

Table 1: Nagato City case

People	31,500 population. Total area of 357.31 km ² . Located in northwestern Yamaguchi Prefecture. Historical city during the Edo Period, called the “ <i>Chōshū</i> domain.”	
Local government	Set many concepts: Hometown Tax Payment System, Development of Direct Sales Outlets Waterfront Development, Townscape Enhancement.	
Private company	Hoshino Resorts, YMFG Co., Ltd., ZONE Planning, Hitachi Systems.	
Local resources	<i>Fugu</i> (blowfish), <i>Chōshū</i> Nagato <i>Wagyu</i> beef, food processing, agriculture, and animal husbandry. Tourism: hot spring.	
Space creation	Urban Development/Community Activities	Nagato government’s partnerships with several companies, Osoto Heaven, Nagato 6G Vision.
	SDGs/Preservation and Regeneration	SDGs kickoff declaration. Agreement with Hitachi Systems.
	Smart city/IoT	Providing free Wi-Fi throughout the city.

Table 2: Suzhou City case

People	10 million population. Total area of 8,488.42 km ² . Located in the south side of the Yangtze River. Its symbol is Yangcheng Lake.	
Local government	Highway Service Area, Yangcheng Lake Tourism and Distribution Center, Shanghai Crab Tour, Fishing Industry, Tourism Industry.	
Private company	Shanghai Crab Specialty Wholesale Store, Hotel, Travel Agency, manufacturing field, served as electronic devices, apparel and fiber, and metal.	
Local resources	Shanghai Crab, Yangcheng Lake, World heritage of Classical Gardens of Suzhou.	
Space creation	Urban Development/Community Activities	Yangcheng Lake Village Community. Construction of Cycling Road.
	SDGs/Preservation and Regeneration	Ecological Civilization Construction. Opinions on Promoting Green Development.
	Smart city/IoT	Meal delivery robots, robot performances, unmanned capsule hotel, VR experience facility.

4.1.2 Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province, China

Suzhou City has a population of about 10 million, with a total area of 8,488.42 km², which is as large as Jamaica. It is located south of the Yangtze River and on the eastern shore of Lake Taihu. Its symbol is Yangcheng Lake, which has an area of 119.04 km² and this is where Shanghai crabs are harvested. In 2019, highway service areas were refurbished, and the Yangcheng Lake Tourism Integration Center, which was designed by the renowned Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, opened its doors. The city has successfully enhanced its attractiveness as a tourist destination. A comparison of the number of visitors between the New Year holidays in 2019, before the center opened, and 2021 shows an increase of approximately 1.5 times and a doubling of tourism revenue. Furthermore, the developed e-commerce landscape in China has allowed IoT technologies to advance, which include meal delivery robots, unmanned capsule hotels, and Virtual Reality (hereafter VR) experience facilities.

From an environmental perspective, Jiangsu Province was the first Chinese province to release a provincial plan, titled the Ecological Civilization Construction (2013-2022) [Jiangsu Province, 2015]. It fostered green and high-tech industries and promoted the shift toward energy saving and resource-efficient production. In March 2020, the Jiangsu provincial

government issued its “Opinions on Promoting Green Development.” The area also has many private companies, especially foreign-affiliated ones. Its industrial area caters to the manufacturing field, developing electronic devices, apparel, fiber, and metals. This situation falls under “urban development/community activities” and “SDGs/preservation and regeneration.” The Suzhou Yangcheng Lake Service Area has also been transformed into a theme park, accomplishing the introduction of a new concept and preserving culture and heritage. The service area provides tourists with a one-stop experience, combining several services. Additionally, by partnering with nearby local restaurants and hotels specializing in the renowned Shanghai crab, the service area has created synergies that contribute to the successful development of the regional economy. This transformation has made the Suzhou Yangcheng Lake Service Area an appealing tourist destination, prompting both tourists and locals to consider it a place worth visiting. The important point is that strong leadership from the Jiangsu government helped increase tourists and consumers of Shanghai crab.

4.1.3 Namegata City, Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan

Namegata City has a population of about 32,000, which is the same size as Nagato City. It has an area of 166.33 km² and

Table 3: Namegata City case

People	32,000 population. Total area of 166.33 km ² . Located in the southeastern part of Ibaraki Prefecture.	
Local government	Comprehensive Strategy for Missing City: (1) Workplace expansion project, (2) Healthy and Cultural Community Development Project, (3) Livable Community Project, (4) projects that are nurtured together, and (5) Japan’s No.1 project in disseminating information.	
Private company	Shirohato Food Corporation, Kyoritsu Maintenance Co., Ltd.	
Local resources	Kasumigaura Lake, the second-largest lake in Japan. Sweet potatoes, pork, vegetables, and hot springs.	
Space creation	Urban Development/Community Activities	Namegata City Community Development Promotion Organization.
	SDGs/Preservation and Regeneration	Namegata City Comprehensive Strategy.
	Smart city/IoT	Fiber optic network.

is located in the southeastern part of Ibaraki Prefecture, about 70 km from central Tokyo. It is home to Kasumigaura Lake, the second-largest lake in Japan. The city is, however, a depopulated area. The Namegata government enacted its policy titled “Comprehensive Strategy for Missing City,” which consists of five projects: (1) the Workplace Expansion Project, (2) the Healthy and Cultural Community Development Project, (3) the Livable Community Project, (4) projects that are nurtured together, and (5) the goal to be number one in information dissemination.

Namegata City has an abundance of local resources, including sweet potatoes, pork, vegetables, and hot springs. Its shipment volume of sweet potatoes is the largest in Japan. However, the appeal of these assets has yet to reach the public as many people remain unfamiliar with Namegata City. The city is also home to the famous Shirohato Food Corporation, which processes snacks made of sweet potato, and can be purchased in convenience stores in Japan. To achieve the SDGs, Namegata City implemented the “Namegata City Comprehensive Strategy” as already mentioned, where citizens and the local government collaboratively envision the city’s future in the next decade by disseminating information and conducting activities. Regarding IoT, efforts include the establishment of the local 5G and city-wide Wi-Fi infrastructure. Under “urban development/community activities” is the Shiraho hot spring. The city’s main revenue streams are primarily derived from hometown tax payments. An important source of revenue is, however, the utilization fees of the Shiraho hot spring along with the sales of products in the souvenir corner within the facility. Regarding hometown tax payments, products available for donation do not effectively promote the city’s local specialties through PR, making it challenging to attract a significant number of contributors. The Shiraho hot spring serves as a municipal tourism and interaction facility, offering a space for citizens and tourists to connect and engage. It was established to help revive tourism and promote the health of the local population. However, because the facility’s primary users are locals, it cannot claim to have successfully attracted tourists.

4.2 Identifying Namegata City’s problems and an improvement plan

4.2.1 Namegata City’s problems

A comparison of business models among the three cities showed that the problems of Namegata City are persistent. According to the framework analysis, Namegata has three issues: the lack of an iconic symbol, few facilities that can attract people, and insufficient public–private collaboration.

First, regarding the lack of an iconic symbol, one commonality between Nagato City in Yamaguchi Prefecture and Suzhou City in China is the presence of specialties that represent these respective regions: *fugu* and Shanghai crab, respectively. Meanwhile, Namegata City lacks such a distinctive symbol. It does have local products such as the Namegata burger, which features catfish, and processed sweet potato snacks, but the issue

lies in the insufficient recognition and perceived attractiveness of these items. Second, with respect to the scarce facilities that attract people, Osoto Heaven in Nagato City and the lake park in Suzhou City have become attractive tourist spots, whereas in Namegata City such facilities are nonexistent. This highlights the importance of creating facilities that tourists would find enticing and encouraging them to visit. Finally, residents, the local government, and companies must collaborate toward regional revitalization. As highlighted in Section 4.1.1, Nagato City has succeeded in regional revitalization through effective public-private partnerships in which not only the collaboration between the local government and Hoshino Resorts but also the coordination with residents played a significant role. Similarly, Suzhou City’s lake park demonstrates that the city has benefited from strong leadership not only in terms of its economy but also the environment.

4.2.2 Suggested improvements

In response to the three issues in Section 4.2.1, this study proposes three measures that Namegata City can implement: (1) strengthening the hometown tax system, (2) reforming the Shiraho hot spring, and (3) using containers in various parks.

First, improving the hometown tax system depends on three tasks: promoting existing products, developing new products, and transitioning from “goods” to “things/experience” consumption. The promotion of existing products entails reviewing and advertising attractive products that the city already has. Namegata City has been a 12-time recipient of the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Award, with products such as “Mimei pork,” “Namegata ice cream,” and “Name pakkun hamburger.” “Hime Ayaka,” a kind of potato, also won the Japan Sweet Potato Summit in 2022. These products are more attractive than those of other cities. By promoting such products on a large scale, consumers, mainly in urban areas, would recognize Namegata City and increase tax revenues through the hometown tax system.

Regarding the development of new products, one candidate would be the Japanese alcoholic *shochu* drink called “Benikogane,” whose raw material is sweet potato. Its unique point is that the *shochu* is submerged in Kasumigaura Lake and aged for one year. By including this in the hometown tax system, people would be attracted by its novelty.

With respect to the shift from “goods” to “things/experience” consumption, the establishment of the “goods” brand is a measure that not only secures tax revenue from “goods” but also uses “things/experience” as refund gifts in the hometown tax system. For example, by opening the Higashi-Kanto Expressway Mito Line (Shiorai-Hokuta) in 2025–2026, Namegata City will build a general park similar to that of Suzhou City and provide tickets for the use of facilities. A hotel and shopping center will be established near the highway service area. This is the biggest opportunity to promote Namegata City. In addition, if vouchers for golf courses and other facilities can be incorporated into the return gifts in the hometown tax system,

Namegata can expect the number of tourists to further increase. If these three measures are realized, consumers will have more opportunities to learn about the city through the signboard products of the Namegata brand and carry out “things/experience” consumption. This will increase opportunities to visit Namegata City.

The second measure involves reforming the Shiraho hot spring similar to Nagato City’s Osoto Heaven. In the same way that Nagato City has partnered with Hoshino Resorts, Namegata City has collaborated with companies to create facilities that would increase tourist satisfaction. Refurbishing the Shiraho hot spring will be accomplished by Kyoritsu Maintenance, which now manages the hot spring. Their concept is the quickest, cheapest, and most reliable way to improve the facilities. A general improvement measure would be a management team composed of locals. Like Osoto Heaven, the new management system in Shiraho hot spring will involve residents. Osoto Heaven employed local people who cleared roads, conducted meetings, and welcomed tourists. The involvement of town locals is crucial.

The third measure is the utilization of containers in various parks to increase the number of tourists (Figure 2). These include the Tennozaki Tourism Exchange Center, the Shiraho hot spring, and Habuyama Park. This study proposes that these containers be converted into “glamping” facilities so that people can enjoy the scenery of the Kasumigaura Lake sunset, which can be seen from the containers, without being distracted by other buildings. In addition, the nearby Tennozaki

Park is known as a star-gazing spot, and visitors can enjoy the night sky after sunset. This opens the opportunity to propose a sightseeing plan that would allow people to enjoy cycling and marine sports in Kasumigaura Lake and then enjoy glamping in a container. In addition, because it is located on the same site as the Shiraho hot spring, visitors can also have a BBQ at dinnertime and enjoy local ingredients. By strengthening cooperation with local farmers and increasing the number of users of glamping facilities, a virtuous cycle is expected to take place which can be beneficial for Namegata City locals.

4. Conclusion

This study sought to compare and analyze successful cases of regional revitalization in relation to Namegata City. Elements that are missing in the city were identified and issues and their corresponding improvement plans were examined.

On February 16, 2023, the author presented the framework and the challenges faced by the city to the mayor and city staff and conducted a question-and-answer session with them afterward. They expressed four perspectives: “specific ready-to-use level,” “there is difficulty in establishing a brand,” “hometown tax plan is feasible,” and “the overall picture is good, but I want a pinpoint proposal.” Many issues remain unaddressed in terms of regional revitalization, but it is intended to implement these plans if a budget can be formulated.

Overall, it is important to consider how it is possible to promote the city as well as which solutions would create a conduit for visitors to the city. The author plans to continue the revitalization of the city. To advance the research further, it is necessary to (1) reconsider and discuss the items in the research framework, (2) consider the increase in the number of successful cases, (3) verify the case of the missing city, and (4) increase the number of target municipalities and analyze them according to the framework.

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Figure 2: Containers

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