

**The Role of Domestic In-migrants for the Revitalization of Marginal Island Communities  
in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan**

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**Introduction**

This brief summarizes the preliminary findings of a research project on domestic urban-to-rural migration to the islands of the Seto Inland Sea, Japan. We focus on in-migrants who established small independent businesses on the islands, and particularly those engaged in tourism, creative industries and organic farming. The study explores the motivations, challenges and opportunities associated with living and establishing small businesses in island communities, and the implications for wider processes of revitalization of marginal rural areas. We used two main research questions as a guide: 1) which factors attract this type of in-migrants to the islands? and 2) is there evidence that their activities give a positive contribution to rural revitalization in these areas? The results of the study may offer insights that can inform local policies aimed at fostering the revitalization of island communities through the settlement of in-migrants. Moreover, considering the global scale of depopulation issues in marginal and remote islands, the findings might be useful to similar island communities in other parts of the world.

**Background**

Population decline and aging in marginal rural areas, driven by the diminishing economic importance of resource-based industries and by long standing processes of rural out-migration, are issues of concern in many parts of the world, especially in the Global North (Mcgranahan & Beale, 2002; Pinilla, Ayuda, & Saez, 2008; Stalker & Phyne, 2014). Here we use the term ‘marginal’ to refer to rural areas that are generally dominated by primary industries, lack in public services and infrastructure (such as roads) and are characterized by economic and demographic decline. Even though marginality is often associated with geographic remoteness, it has been shown that marginalization can also result from poor socioeconomic and political connectivity, and therefore marginality is not always synonymous with remoteness of geographical location (Bock, 2016). Japan is an emblematic case, with many of its rural areas fitting the description of marginal areas, and it is one of the countries where the compounded effects of rural aging and depopulation are manifesting the earliest (Feldhoff, 2013; MAFF, 2016; Matanle, 2016). Efforts to increase the population of marginal rural communities have been intensified in recent years, for example through programs aimed at attracting new residents. One example is the ‘*chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai*’ (regional revitalization cooperation group) program, established in 2008 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. This program supports urban residents willing to move to depopulating rural areas of Japan to engage in various kinds of local revitalization activities. Such activities include regional branding and the development and/or promotion of local products, the creation of events to attract new in-migrants from urban areas, and the strengthening of support services for local residents (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2009).

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**Study area**

This research project focuses on domestic rural in-migrants in the Seto Inland Sea region of Japan. The Seto Inland Sea is home to more than 700 islands, around half of which are inhabited. While not all islands are remote in terms of physical distance from the mainland, many of them are not connected by bridges, and access through ferry transportation is limited. The availability of essential services to the population (schools, hospitals, grocery stores) is also limited and has been deteriorating further as a result of the steady population decline.

This study specifically focuses on in-migrants who created their own business activities on the islands. We considered three types of businesses: creativity-based (meaning industries based on individual creativity, skill and talent— in our case they included occupations such as artist, photographer, and freelance writer); tourism-oriented; and organic farming. The motivations for this choice are twofold. First, local employment opportunities are limited, especially in smaller islands. Second, tourism and creative industries are increasingly seen as potential drivers of rural economic revitalization (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Lysgård, 2016; Sidali, Spiller, & Schulze, 2011). Moreover, while primary industries in general, and conventional agriculture in particular, are of little attractiveness for rural in-migrants, the desire to engage in organic and sustainable farming has been shown to be an important driver of in-migration to rural Japan (Obikwelu, Ikegami, & Tsuruta, 2017).

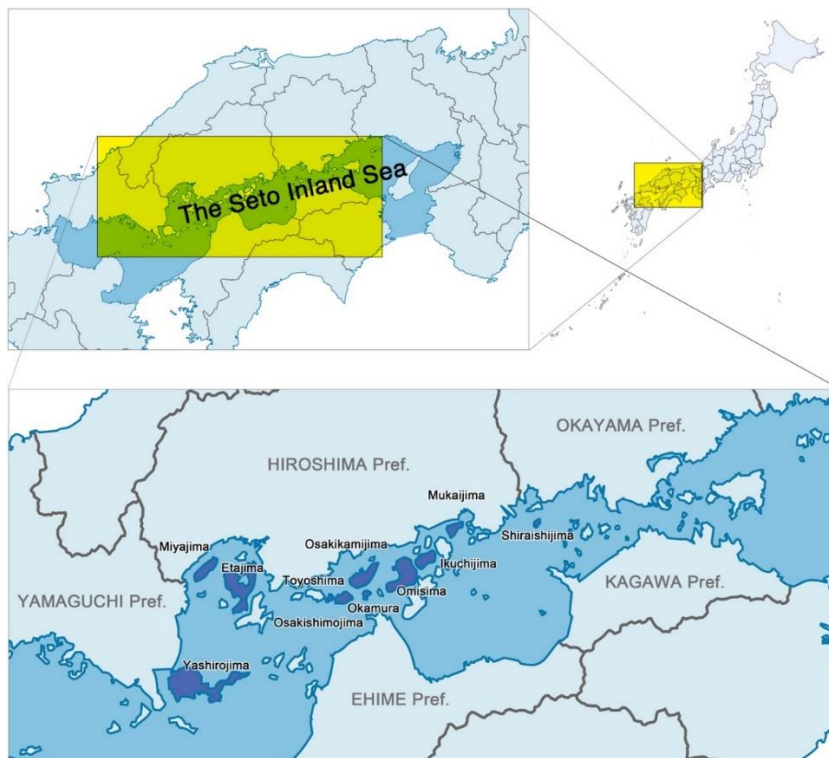


Figure 1: A map of the Seto Inland Sea, showing the islands included in the research (in dark blue) (Source: created by authors)

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### Methodology

The study includes 11 islands belonging to four of the prefectures that have access to the Seto Inland Sea (Hiroshima, Okayama, Ehime and Yamaguchi) (Figure 1). The islands were selected based on the following criteria: 1) presence or absence of bridges connecting the island to the mainland; 2) islands considered to be depopulating or at risk of depopulation according to national and prefectural standards; and 3) islands where in-migrants belonging to the target groups could be located. To identify potential respondents, we used a mix of purposive and snowball sampling. We conducted a total of 35 semi-structured interviews with in-migrants between September 2018 and March 2019, ranging from a minimum of one interview for the smaller islands to a maximum of seven interviews for the larger ones.

### Preliminary findings

Table 1 summarizes the main findings in the form of a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. Although it is most commonly used in the business management field, its application extends to many other fields, where it is used to give an overview of the situation being researched and as a starting point for decision-making in complex situations (Helms & Nixon, 2010). It has also been applied to European rural development policy planning (Knierim & Nowicki, 2010). Some of the findings of our SWOT analysis are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

*Table 1: summary of preliminary findings through SWOT analysis. Internal aspects include both characteristics of in-migrants as well as of the communities that host them.*

	<b>Helpful</b>	<b>Harmful</b>
<b>Internal</b>	<p><b>Strengths:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-migrant adaptability and flexibility: positive view of living in remote rural areas, freedom and lifestyle of choice</li> <li>• Low cost of living</li> <li>• Existence of in-migrant networks</li> <li>• Relationship with locals (welcoming, support)</li> <li>• Less competition with other businesses</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aging and depopulation of local communities</li> <li>• Relationship with locals (narrow-minded society, unwillingness to change)</li> <li>• Scarcity of waged jobs locally</li> </ul>
<b>External</b>	<p><b>Opportunities:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attracting other young in-migrants, especially those aiming for independent/creative work</li> <li>• Availability of housing/land to rent or buy</li> <li>• High-speed internet connection</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of infrastructure and services (hospitals, schools)</li> <li>• Difficulty of accessing housing/land as an ‘outsider’</li> <li>• Uneven coverage of high-speed internet connection</li> </ul>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Express shipping services</li> <li>• Tourism-oriented infrastructure (e.g. cycling roads)</li> <li>• Presence of bridges with the mainland</li> <li>• National/local policy support for in-migrants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of “special” features to leverage for tourism development</li> <li>• Absence of bridges</li> <li>• High transportation costs</li> <li>• Lacking/uneven local policy support</li> </ul>
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### Respondents’ profile and motivations

Most of the 35 respondents are in their 30s and 40s and had no previous ties to the island they chose. Three had family ties with their island and returned after a prolonged period of living elsewhere. Forty-one percent are involved in organic farming, 41 percent in creative professions (photographers, artists, craft makers), and 35 percent in tourism and service businesses (homestays and inns, cafés, restaurants). Many of the respondents, however, belong to more than one group, and some engage in part-time waged work as well, making a clear-cut classification difficult. In general, in-migrants are involved in more than one activity and are highly flexible in their work-related choices. A common characteristic of the respondents is the voluntary choice of living in the islands, meaning that they were not driven by external forces such as family or job relocation. Their main motivation is the perceived higher quality of life on the islands and the desire of creating their own independent business.

### Relationships and networks

Establishing connections with local residents is often vital for accessing housing and other resources. This is even more important for organic farmers, because it is extremely hard to secure farmland without being supported by a local farmer. At the same time, relationships with local community members are sometimes strained, and things such as the unspoken obligation of participating in communal volunteer activities (e.g. organizing festivals, street cleaning) are seen as burdensome, as young newcomers are often expected to take part in a disproportionate number of these activities.

In-migrants react to these challenges through both institutional and informal networks. Among institutional networks, the *chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai* system proved to be important for some of the in-migrants, because it acts as a go-between among aspiring newcomers and locals. More commonly, however, in-migrants rely on informal networks with other in-migrants, either on the same or on neighbouring islands. This type of network is important not only for obtaining practical information and support, but also for overcoming the sense of social and cultural isolation that some in-migrants feel.

### Infrastructure and site-specific characteristics

High-speed internet access and the possibility of ordering items online and having them delivered to the island were consistently indicated as the two major factors enabling in-migrants to live and run businesses on the islands. While shipping services reach all the islands and are affordable, high

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speed internet coverage is spottier and was considered a potential deterrent to attracting other young in-migrants to some islands. The presence or absence of bridges was also mentioned, even though it was not as crucial as the previous two. As most migrants live and work on the islands year-round, the absence of bridges is not perceived as significantly decreasing their overall quality of life. Moreover, the lower cost of most living expenses compensates for disadvantages such as higher transportation costs.

Finally, the type of activities that in-migrants engage in is often related to specific characteristics of each island. For example, while most of the Seto Inland Sea islands have high rates of farmland abandonment and there is a lot of land potentially available to in-migrants wishing to do organic farming, there is often resistance against organic practices from local conventional farmers. One of the islands, however, thanks to the efforts of a newcomer organic farmers network combined with supportive local policies, is becoming a small hub for organic farming in the western part of the Seto Inland Sea.

### **Policies to support in-migrants**

Five respondents moved to the islands after becoming *chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai* members and were able to access financial support and housing through the program. As members, they are also guaranteed support to develop new businesses or services. For the other in-migrants, the type of support they were able to access varied widely depending on the island, as policies for supporting in-migration are left to each municipality. In some instances, in-migrants were able to find housing or land through local ‘vacant house banks’ or ‘land banks’ (information systems listing some of the available properties for sale in a municipality, often managed by the local government, and generally offering such properties at very low rates and aiming at simplifying the buying and selling process (Takahashi, Sano, & Takano, 2014)), but most of them had to rely on private connections and lamented a lack of support from local governments. This aspect was identified by most in-migrants as a crucial weak point: due to the relatively ‘closed’ nature of many small island communities, the presence of a mediating body is considered an important factor for the successful settlement of in-migrants. Programs such as the *chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai*, while helpful, have a relatively limited reach and are not accessible to all potential in-migrants.

### **Implications**

The preliminary results of the study highlight some of the factors behind the successful settlement of rural in-migrants, especially those interested in establishing independent businesses in depopulating and remote areas. Even though the exploratory approach used in this research prevents a wider generalization of the findings, it offers useful insights for discussion and directions for future research. For example, further research is needed on the *chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai* system to assess its effectiveness and explore the potential of a similar system to be established in other countries as well.

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