

Shrinking Japanese Cities and Towns

Hirohide Konami
Executive Director

Research Institute of National Land Policy, Tokyo, Japan

(This paper was presented in the EAROPH Regional Seminar 2013 at Johor Bahru, Malaysia)

It is not obvious yet but it is sure that Japanese cities and towns will shrink in recent years. Japanese total population reached its peak of about 128 million in or around 2005 and estimated to be less than 100 million in the year of 2046 or around. In such situation, national capital region, in other words Tokyo Metropolitan Region, still attracts large population migration. This area will continue to grow in population size until the year of around 2030. Even though outskirts of the area have started to decrease already.

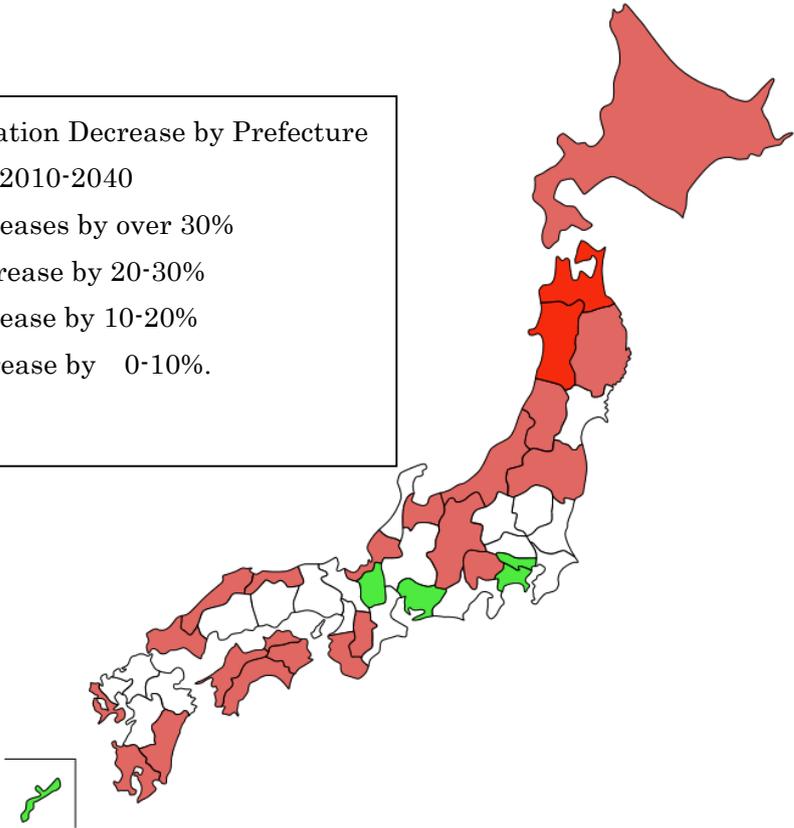
Fig.1 shows the population decrease rate by prefectures from 2010 to 2040. Red area, Aomori and Akita, decreases by over 30%, brown area, 21 prefectures out of 47, by 20-30% , white area 10-20% and green area by 0-10%. All prefectures decrease by the year of 2040 and national population in 2040 will be 107 million. This is the decrease of 16% compared to 128 million of 2010.

The rate of Japanese urban population is about 70% and stabilized in recent years. It means that not urban area population decreases quickly. What is happening in those country side and urban fringe?

Fig.2 shows the typical country side and few population remains in the area. Therefore, schools, clinics, shops and many urban functions are going to close in those areas and over 2000 communities will disappear within coming 10 or 20 years. We call these areas “Genkai Shuuraku”, meaning is “beyond the limit areas”.



Table 1 Population Decrease by Prefecture 2010-2040	
Red:	decreases by over 30%
Brown:	decrease by 20-30%
White:	decrease by 10-20%
Green:	decrease by 0-10%.



In urban fringe, a lot of vacant houses exist already. The total number of vacant houses and apartments over the country in 2008 was about 7.5 million and about half of them are located within three big metropolitan areas, Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. The reasons why such big number of houses have become vacant would be that former aged residents have died and no successor appears to live or successors exist but they don't like to sell or abandon those houses because they keep something inside such as valuable memories of ancestors. Another aspect is that the family size in Japan is less than three since 1992 and married couple is enough to succeed the house of either side of the couple. Then the house of another side becomes vacant. These vacant houses cause many problems, fear for fallen down, risk for crimes, bad influence on landscape or urban cleanness and so on.



Abandoned house



After clear up

In case of Ku-re City, dangerous vacant house can be eliminated by the municipality subsidies. Land owner, house owner or their successors can apply for the subsidies under the agreement of related people.

Basic discussions for these problems would be as follows.

- 1) Estimation of the amount and the location of those vacant houses
- 2) Decision making of uselessness or usefulness of those houses
- 3) Definition of usefulness such as how to use, who will own, how much does it cost to rehabilitate, and so on.
- 4) Follow up of useless houses such as to fall down or not, who shoulder the cost, what is the usage of vacant land, and so on.

To build compact cities is the common target in Japan but how to do that is quite blind. One of the purposes would be to utilize the public facilities in central areas more heavily and this policy may sound good but who will migrate and how to supply their transfer cost are not clear yet. Their properties in suburbs are difficult to sell and even if they succeed to transfer to down town, still they are required to shoulder the maintenance cost of the properties in suburbs.

One idea is that the vacant land produced by the relocation of aged people in suburbs should be change into farmland or green parks. In this half of a century, Land Readjustment technique was used to produce housing sites but it will be used to collect vacant land to suitable corners and make them use for the other usage than housing. For this purpose, there is a proposal that zoning of city planning should include the farming zone in addition to the zones for urban usage. And it may be also necessary to amend the Land Readjustment Law to include the construction of farming land. In this way, some benefit may be distributed to the original landowners.

Now, how to plan the compact city? If we draw it on the virginal map, it may be easy to draw up, but there would exist traditional cities and towns. I have two images for the future.

One is the worst image as follows:

"There are a lot of abandoned houses and some of those are going to fall down, but municipalities don't have the enough budgets to clear them away. Therefore, the landscape becomes like a ghost town."

Another is the better image like this:

"In medium size local town, many families have passed away or moved to the other towns in order to live together with their children. Vacant houses were sold or lent and new residents live there. Some of the useless houses, not sold or lent, were cleared by the municipality and the vacant land lots are used for some other purposes such as parking, farming and green parks under the management of municipalities or some other organizations. After 20 or 30 years, so many vacant land lots appeared and the municipality decided to execute Land

Readjustment. Vacant land lots are gathered to one corner and used for farms, forest, sports ground, villages for aged people or other good usage. On the other hand, aged people migrated to the city center and downtown area is more activated than ever before.”

It would be also recommended to introduce the higher rate of property tax on vacant land and houses and the automatic public acquisition system of ownerless land and properties.

More big problems are the cost of city management. Schools will lose pupils and students, lifeline will feel idleness, public buildings will have useless space, and lightings or other a lot of public properties become unnecessary.

Now, were there any good ideas to avoid facing such situation?

- 1) Japanese constitution allows everybody the free choice of his living place. During the high economic growth, many young people migrated from countryside to big cities. As a result, countryside became low population density and the proportion of aged people has jumped. Even though, if family size is large enough, there is no problem because one or two children will remain in countryside and succeed the traditions. Present Japanese family size is only 2.4. This means no child will be left in countryside. If possible, government should have some good policy to promote the baby born in those areas.
- 2) Japanese national development plan was trying to close the gap between cities and countries before 1982 but the Nakasone Cabinet started to deregulate the zoning in downtown of big cities. Super-tall buildings came appear mainly in Tokyo downtown and the population migration and the concentration of urban functions to downtown areas was promoted. It was very good in the sense of compact city but it also promoted the increase of empty houses in suburbs and the outflow of urban functions from the other cities. If we could have continued the strict zoning regulation in downtown areas, such super tall buildings in downtown would have been suppressed and traffic condition would have been better. In the same time, so many super tall office buildings were constructed in downtown of Tokyo and Osaka and this caused the concentration of urban functions to two big country centers. This means the deterioration of other cities and towns in the other areas.
- 3) The quality of houses in the suburbs of big cities during high economic growth was not necessarily good enough. Some foreigners called these houses as a rabbit house. Then those houses became worthless and cannot find buyers. We should have prohibited the construction of such small houses and supplied more cute apartment houses in more convenient places.

Now, we need the planning of cities and towns in the shrinking circumstances.

Basic assumptions would be as follows.

- 1) Even the population decreases, economy size will remain or grow in the future.
- 2) The freedom of residence choice will be assured.
- 3) “A family on relief” system will be applied for all Japanese under the certain condition.
- 4) Deregulation of national governmental control will be promoted and municipalities will be

able to control the entire city planning processes.

In this background, population migration will become competitive among municipalities and people will choose better quality of life in transportation, shopping, education, learning, medical services, natural environment, safety and security, community performance and etc. Aged people are free to choose their residence because they have no duty and daily life is supported by a pension fund or “a family on relief” system. Therefore, they will have the tendency to stay at the same place as present. Many will remain in countryside.

Middle age people with children will choose better job, better education and better living conditions. They will have the tendency to migrate to big cities.

Young people with no children will stay at anywhere they like. They will choose the preferable place to study, to work, to enjoy, to contribute or to make adventure.

Therefore, the most important strategy would be as follows.

- 1) In countryside, aged people will remain lonely and municipality should take care for them. It would be recommendable to help them to relocate to city or town center apartment, if they got some trouble to keep the sound daily life. If they are sound enough to spend daily life, it is ok to allow them to remain as present. So, some development plan in city or town center for aged and disabled people will be required. Also some utilizing or demolishing program for their present houses will be needed. If we can find somebody to live in the same house, it would be the best.
- 2) In metropolitan areas such as Tokyo and Osaka region, the number of vacant houses in suburbs will increase rapidly. It is necessary to demolish those houses and utilize the empty land in some way. The best usage of those empty lands would be farming and land ownership should be suspended. The migration to downtown will be continued and some counter measures to regulate the excess migration to downtown would be needed. The aged people staying in super tall apartment houses were found that they cannot stay there in case of big earthquake because of the stop of elevator and water supply. Then super tall office buildings may be acceptable to some extent but super tall apartment houses should be restricted in downtown. The same planning strategy would be applicable for the other big cities.
- 3) In case of medium size cities with the population of 100 thousand to 500 thousand, the same problem as metropolitan areas will happen but problem scale is not so big. They can have some solutions case by case. It may be a good chance to introduce new industries that are facing some difficulties in overseas operations in the past decades. There would be a lot of vacant houses and lands with the cheaper labor forth, including foreigners, in the present Japanese countryside.

As a result, we need the following policies:

- 1) Down town regeneration program
- 2) Demand base community bus system
- 3) Governmental fund to demolish or rehabilitate abandoned houses
- 4) New land readjustment system to create new farming land in suburbs
- 5) Information and management system for empty houses and lands
- 6) Strict national policy to regulate the excessive concentration in metropolitan areas
- 7) To grow the necessary human resources to promote above policies

Thank you

Author: Hirohide KONAMI (Ph.D.) is an EAROPH life-time and council member.

He was born in 1942 in Tokyo and studied at the University of Tokyo and Harvard Graduate School of Design majored in city planning.

He worked for Japanese Government 1966-1996, for visiting professor of the University of the Philippines in 1997, then worked as a professor in Toyo University 1998-2003, Tokyo Jogakkan University 2004-2007, and Teikyo Heisei University 2008-2012.

(Home page: <http://konamike.net/hiro/> Mail: hiro@konamike.net)