

Building Networks for Comprehensive Support Systems: Insights from an Interview Survey Conducted in a Depopulated Municipality

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Received: November 26, 2024. Revised: December 25, 2024. Accepted: December 26, 2024..

Abstract

This study focuses on network building among stakeholders to promote collaboration. The study also uses a case study of a depopulated municipality to identify the important factors to consider when establishing comprehensive support systems. From December 2022 to December 2023, the author conducted interview surveys with a local government administrative officer, four Social Welfare Council staff members, and one think tank employee in Town A. Before implementing the Layered Support Development Project, Town A had previously instituted the “local mutual support model,” which involved conducting volunteer monitoring activities and utilizing general consultation hubs. The sense of security and trust generated by these monitoring activities is exemplified by the following statement made by a volunteer: “Because we go to check on them regularly, they even tell me their specific illness or date of hospitalization, as if we are actual family members.” This mutual support network and friendly resident monitoring form a community safety net. The local government and Social Welfare Council staff recognized the importance of ensuring early detection, responding to residents’ need for precautionary support, and acknowledging the crucial role of volunteers. Consideration could be given to incorporating actionable strategies to enhance the self-efficacy of volunteers and foster a shared understanding among staff to build a comprehensive support system for depopulated municipalities.

Keywords: Comprehensive Support System, Layered Support Development Project, General Consultation Hubs, Networking among Staff, Monitoring Activities

JEL Classification Code:

1. Introduction

According to the Statistics Bureau at the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2024), Japan’s total population in 2024 stood at stands at 124 million, which marks a decrease of 595,000 from the previous year and continues a 13-year streak of population decline. Population decline is even more accelerated in rural areas of Japan. Indeed, as of April

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2022, 1,416 out of 1,719 municipalities (82.4%) across Japan experienced population decline, with 885 municipalities (51.5%) being designated “depopulated areas” by the Japanese Government (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2022).

Depopulated areas grappling with aging populations and an increasing number of single households face significant challenges in maintaining community cohesion. An increase in foreign residents, long-term pathological social withdrawal, and the demands of caring for both children and the elderly have further exacerbated this challenge. Kiritōshi and Nomura (2019) emphasize that “resolving the issues of residents is expected to become even more difficult” and suggest that initiating a “new public consultation system may benefit Japanese society as a whole.”

In 2015, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan began initial efforts to establish a new comprehensive support system to assist households facing complex issues between existing support systems. This new support system is intended to provide comprehensive support to people of all ages and all types of households and promote collaboration among local communities. The 2020 amendment to the Social Welfare Act further advanced this proposal by establishing the Layered Support Development Project.

This project, which was implemented in 2021, was a crucial support for the formation of the comprehensive support system. Nagata (2021) emphasizes that enabling comprehensive social support requires the efforts of local governments and the involvement of local stakeholders. Similarly, Iwama (2012) has highlighted the necessity of forming networks of professionals and local stakeholders to meet local people’s needs and solve the challenges they face in everyday life. Many existing studies have also noted the importance of building broad networks of local stakeholders as a preliminary step for ensuring social support work.

This study focuses on network building between stakeholders to promote collaboration. Moreover, through a case study conducted in a depopulated municipality, the study also seeks to identify the most important factors for establishing comprehensive support. The municipalities surveyed for this study have a demographic structure similar to the demographic structure that is estimated to be representative of Japan in 2040. Thus, this study provides insight into constructing future comprehensive support systems for depopulated areas.

2. Recent Trends and the Social Background of Local Welfare

2.1. Trends and Social Background of Local Welfare

Following WWII, the Japanese Government introduced public welfare programs, such as the Livelihood Protection Act and the Child Welfare Act. These programs were influenced by the care provided to wounded military veterans. However, Japan’s “vertical administration” approach to welfare posed challenges, as each support system was designed to meet specific needs and serve certain target groups. This approach made it difficult to provide comprehensive support to entire households. Despite some policy efforts to bridge different support systems—such as programs for the elderly, people with disabilities, and children—the need for a more integrated system was evident.

During the rapid economic growth of the late 1960s, people concentrated in urban areas and followed the model of the nuclear family. This led to a population decline and aging communities in rural areas. Japan’s aging rate, which refers to the portion of those over 65 years old among the total population, exceeded 7% in 1970 and reached 14% by 1990. As the rate of aging increased, elder caregiving became a pressing issue. The Japanese Government established social welfare facilities to promote a public caregiving system. In 2000, the Social Welfare Business Act was amended and renamed the Social Welfare Act, which included “promoting community welfare” as one of its objectives. In the same year, the Long-Term Care Insurance Act, which established a public caregiving insurance system, was implemented. The Act was revised to establish Community Comprehensive Support Centers in 2006. Iwama (2011) notes that the Community Comprehensive Support Centers impacted not only the welfare system for older people but also the entire Japanese public welfare system, as the centers emphasized comprehensive consultation and local support services that served social welfare needs. This comprehensive consultation support systems, which originated from efforts to improve elderly welfare, sought to address all issues and groups to prevent people from falling into the gaps between different support systems. In 2017, the Social Welfare Act was further amended to require local governments to promote collaboration between local support institutions and build comprehensive support systems addressing community welfare issues.

2.2. Comprehensive Support Systems

In response to the increasing complexity and diversity of the issues faced by individuals and households, comprehensive support systems must be designed to cover all ages and groups. In this context, the Japanese Government attempted to establish comprehensive support systems by expanding the community-level care system for older people and extending independent livelihood support to impoverished people of all ages. The goal was to build a system where various agencies could collaborate to provide the support necessary to solve social problems. Specifically, this involves (1) establishing an environment where local residents can actively identify and address issues related to daily life in their "familiar areas," (2) creating systems within these areas to comprehensively handle consultations related to life within the community, and (3) building comprehensive consultation support systems through multiagency collaboration.

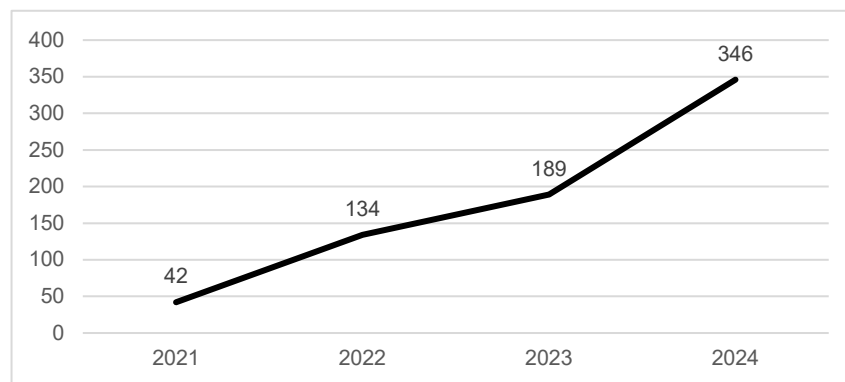
The Layered Support Development Project, which was established by the 2020 amendment to the Social Welfare Act, aims to utilize existing consultation support initiatives to establish comprehensive support systems for solving the challenges faced by community members. This project seeks to build a community safety net through professional consultation-based support and mutual support between residents, ensuring a flexible monitoring system.

2.3. The Role of Social Welfare Councils in Comprehensive Support Systems

For local governments to establish comprehensive support systems, they must collaborate with Social Welfare Councils (SWCs), which have built close relationships with communities. Article 109 of the 2000 Social Welfare Act stipulated that SWCs, which were originally established in 1955, should be utilized to support community welfare. Harada (2012) states that while SWCs were initially intended to promote private care, they gradually became influenced by and involved in public administration. SWCs have focused on organizing local communities to address diverse needs, as well as developing community support in collaboration with residents and stakeholders. Their activities include improving community welfare, providing educational opportunities, facilitating volunteer activities, and creating hubs for resident interactions.

2.4. Status of implementation of the Layered Support Development Project

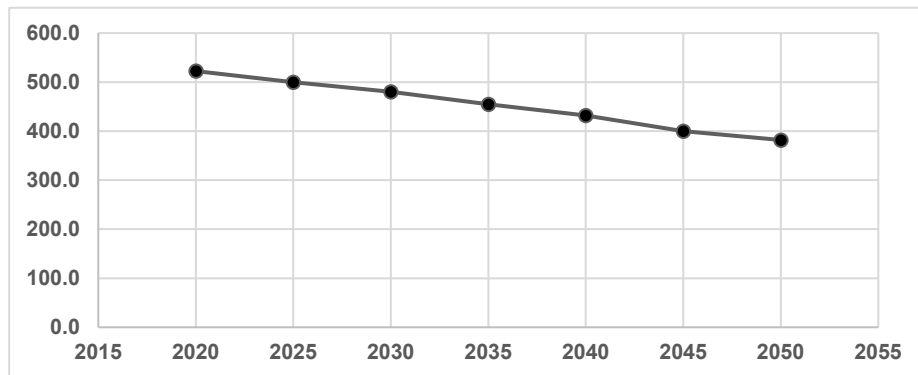
In 2021, the Layered Support Development Project was initiated. In 2021, 42 local governments worked on this project. The number of municipalities implementing this project is increasing each year: 134 in 2022, 189 in 2023, and 346 in 2024 (see Figure 1).



Note: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2024

Figure 1. Status of implementation of the Layered Support Development Project

By 2050, Hokkaido's total population is projected to decrease by approximately 27%, reaching around 3.28 million people (see Figure 2). The population will decrease throughout Hokkaido Prefecture, with 67 local governments experiencing a decrease of 50% or more. In addition, 122 local governments have a population size of less than 5000. In 2024, 14 local governments in Hokkaido Prefecture are engaged in the Layered Support Development Project. This project seeks to build a community safety net through professional consultation-based support and mutual support between residents, ensuring a flexible monitoring system.



Note: Hokkaido Prefecture Homepage.

Figure2. Estimated total population of Hokkaido Prefecture

But, except for Town A and B, where the population is small and the aging rate is high, there is no mutual support or ensuring a flexible monitoring by residents (see Table 1). The project, which began in 2021, is entering its fourth year in 2024. The local governments are creating a system through which comprehensive support is provided according to local conditions.

Table 1: The Layered Support Development Project implementation local government in Hokkaido Prefecture

Town	population	aging rate (%)	Starting year	staff
A	4,201	45.1	2021	professional, volunteer
B	2,659	48.1	2021	professional, volunteer
C	6,688	34.9	2021	professional
D	5,080	31.4	2022	professional
E	5,283	36.2	2024	professional
F	6,153	40.8	2022	professional
G	109,820	41.5	2024	professional
H	326,772	34.5	2022	professional
I	45,974	37.2	2024	professional
J	27,958	34.7	2021	professional
K	2,797	36.6	2024	professional
L	4,340	38.2	2023	professional
M	43,368	29.5	2022	professional
N	26,127	33.6	2023	professional

Note: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. (2024).

3. Building Local Networks to Facilitate Comprehensive Support Systems

From December 2022 to December 2023, the author conducted interview surveys with a local government administrative officer, four Social Welfare Council staff members, and one think tank employee in Town A. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent using an IC recorder and then transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. This study was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Graduate School of Human Life Science at Osaka City University (Approval No. 21-62, January 12, 2022).

3.1. The Comprehensive Support System and General Consultation Hub in Town A

3.1.1. Overview of Town A

Town A is located in the inland area of the eastern Okhotsk region. It is one of the largest town areas in Hokkaido Prefecture, and it borders two cities and five towns. The primary industries of Town A include logging and the manufacturing of wood products, as well as agriculture, including wheat, potatoes, and sugar beet cultivations. The population, which grew to 15,676 in 1960 due to postwar industrial development and settlement, began to decline in 1965. By 2015, the population had decreased to 5,008, with 2,231 households, and by 2023, it had further declined to 4,078, with 2,152 households. As of 2023, the aging rate was 45.1%. According to future population projections by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research and the Japan Policy Council, the population is expected to drop to 2,846 by 2040 and 1,646 by 2070. In response, Town A formulated a Sustainable Development Plan for FY2021 - FY2025.

3.1.2. History of Town A's Efforts to Establish a Comprehensive Support System

In 2015, Town A initiated a project called the "Local Mutual Support Model." This involved surveying living conditions in the town and examining the local community ties among the 499 households comprising 13 neighborhood associations. This survey was conducted through home visits, and it sought to identify people in poor living conditions and to preemptively identify households likely to need support in the next five to ten years. Between 2016 and 2018, four general consultation hubs (locally known as "*potto*" welfare consultation offices) were established. They are operated collaboratively by resident volunteers, local government workers, and Social Welfare Council staff. This project aimed to (1) provide preventive support through early detection and response, (2) facilitate problem-solving and monitoring through mutual support activities, and (3) support problem-solving through collaboration between residents and professional staff. Since April 2021, Town A has been participating in the Layered Support Development Project led by the Japanese Government.

3.2. Monitoring Activities by Supporters and Building Networking Among Residents

Before implementing the Layered Support Development Project, Town A had previously instituted the "local mutual support model, which involved conducting volunteer monitoring activities and utilizing general consultation hubs." The sense of security and trust generated by these monitoring activities is exemplified by the following statement made by a volunteer: "Because we go check on them regularly, they even tell me their specific illness or date of hospitalization, as if we are actual family members." This mutual support network and friendly resident monitoring form a community safety net. The local government and Social Welfare Council staff recognized the importance of ensuring early detection, responding to residents' need for precautionary support, and acknowledging the crucial role of volunteers. For example, one local government worker stated, "What we need to be most careful about is changes in individuals. Only residents can notice these changes because they see each other frequently." They also stated, "We share information about residents who are likely to need support in the next five or ten years." These statements highlight the importance of being attentive to changes, caring for residents, and sharing information - all of which contribute to strong community ties. In depopulated areas where it is challenging to secure professional staff, it is essential for local governments to build networks with volunteer residents who can provide such informal support.

3.3. The Role of General Consultation Hubs

General consultation hubs are also crucial in establishing comprehensive support systems. These hubs help professional staff actively engage with residents facing difficulties. In Town A, where comprehensive support systems were formed around general consultation hubs, there were challenges, such as the sense of being compelled among staff assigned to the hubs. One staff member stated, "We had assigned a staff member for the hubs in rotation. However, some staff felt forced to do it. Some

felt like, ‘Once I get assigned, will I be the one handling this forever?’” Furthermore, they lacked a common understanding of the comprehensive support system. This was reflected in the following statements: “When new or less experienced staff members didn’t understand the purpose of the initiatives, it was sorry to hear.” However, there was also positive feedback: “A staff member stated, ‘We will not succeed unless we all commit to this.’ And during the transition to a layered system, it was beneficial to discuss how to operate welfare consultation offices and recognize the importance of our involvement.” This statement highlights the importance of the general consultation hubs and their staff.

4. Conclusion

In Town A, comprehensive support systems centered around general consultation hubs are being promoted. Resident volunteers monitor, care for, and engage with people experiencing difficulties, which helps maintain relationships within the community. People desire to continue living in the neighborhoods that are familiar to them not only because of family ties but also because of the presence of trustworthy individuals who care for them. The key to sustaining these relationships lies in the roles of local governments and professionals. When local governments implement the Layered Support System Development Project, they must ensure that all staff members share a common understanding. Staff members are expected to take a proactive approach to learning about the project. Fujii (2019) emphasizes that because administrative officers will also eventually become recipients of said support schemes, it is essential to build a support system that removes barriers between those who provide and receive support. In summary, it is important for local governments in depopulated areas that are attempting to establish comprehensive support systems to ensure that resident volunteers who provide informal support engage in discussions about the community and residents, reaching a consensus that enables them to obtain a sense of self-efficacy. Moreover, it is also important to foster shared understanding and proactive attitudes among local government workers and staff of related agencies; this will enable them to work toward a common cause. From this point, consideration could be given to incorporating actionable strategies to enhance the self-efficacy of volunteers and foster a shared understanding among staff.

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