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## Has COVID-19 affected urban-to-rural and rural-to-urban migration patterns?

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**R**ural–urban migration patterns in Finland, Japan, and South Korea have been relatively one-sided since at least the 1950s. Out-migration to large cities, especially to the capital regions of Helsinki, Tokyo, and Seoul, has greatly diminished rural communities and rendered their future prospects more challenging. However, the COVID-19

pandemic seems to have slowed this development, and perhaps even reversed it. It now seems that there could be the potential for rural population growth.

It was this interesting notion, evident in all three subject countries, that started the preparation for a joint virtual research seminar between the University of Helsinki's Ruralia Institute, the Hirosaki University Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Humanities and Migration Institute of Finland Seinäjoki unit. In addition to the academics from these institutions, regional officials from the city of Seinäjoki (Finland) and the Aomori Prefecture (Japan) also participated in the virtual seminar: *COVID-19 and migration between rural regions and cities in Finland, Japan, and South Korea – Current research and preliminary reflections*, which was held on 23 November 2021.

### **People are on the move, but no major shifts in Japan or Finland so far**

In Japan, the largely rural Aomori Prefecture, located at the very north of the island of Honshu some 700 kilometers from the capital of Tokyo, has lost almost 20 per cent of its population in less than 40 years. Many individuals from the younger generations are leaving the prefecture, and moving especially to the Tokyo metropolitan area. The rapidly ageing region of Aomori is thus suffering from labor shortages in every sector of its economy. In order to tackle this problem the prefecture has taken several measures, for example sponsoring migration fairs and offering integration services for Japanese citizens considering moving to the region, as reported by Group Manager Mitsuaki Hasegawa from the Aomori Prefecture. (Hanada 2021; Hasegawa 2021.)

The COVID-19 era was seen as an opportunity to promote change. The prospects looked promising for Aomori. Among young adults in their 20s living in the Tokyo metropolitan area, more than 40 percent were interested in moving to more rural surroundings in the early stages of the pandemic. (Hasegawa 2021.)

Nevertheless, statistics compiled by Associate Professor Shinichi Hanada from Hirosaki University clearly showed that the pandemic had also stagnated intermunicipal migration in Japan. A mass migration of young adults from Tokyo to rural regions did not materialize. There were,

however, some noticeable changes. The population outflow from Tokyo did increase to some extent, but it mostly affected regions and municipalities close to the capital. Regions far from the capital, like Aomori, did not receive much net migration. (Hanada 2021; Hasegawa 2021.)

In Finland, the COVID crisis has also been seen as a possible impetus towards more balanced regional development and intermunicipal migration (e.g., Kuhmonen 2020, 190–192; Muilu 2021). Nevertheless, there have been no major changes in Finnish intermunicipal migration patterns so far. According to Urszula Ala-Karvia, from the University of Helsinki's Ruralia Institute, the number of people who left the capital Helsinki in the year 2020 was the highest in a decade. While the capital region Uusimaa recorded a historically high rate of out-migration, there was no statistically significant correlation between the rate of COVID-19 cases and intermunicipal migration in Finland. (Ala-Karvia 2021.)

There were, however, some positive signs for rural Finland. For example, the largely rural Kainuu and Lapland regions had the lowest migration losses in over 40 years in 2020. In addition, Lapland increased its Finnish-speaking population for the first time in 30 years, however due to the out-migration of foreign language speakers a population loss was still recorded. (Ala-Karvia 2021.)

## **Multilocality and telecommuting as rising trends in Finland and Japan**

The number of people pursuing multilocal lifestyles has increased in Finland during the pandemic. Studies by Willberg et al. (2021) and Lehtonen and Kotavaara (2021), based on mobile phone data, confirmed that Finns had spent more time in their second homes and other rural locations than before the pandemic. It seems that the traditional connection between the geographical location of the workplace and the place of residence can be successfully broken.

High speed broadband connections are central to supporting multilocal lifestyles and telecommuting. In Seinäjoki, the regional capital of rural Etelä-Pohjanmaa located in western Finland, the pandemic has led to an increasing demand for fiber optic interfaces in the rural areas of the city as an increasing number of residents began working from their home

offices, as reported by Director of Development Erkki Välimäki from the city of Seinäjoki. (Välimäki 2021.)

The rural town of Kamiyama, located 400 kilometers southwest of Tokyo, is a leader in developing Japanese telecommuting. According to Professor Fumihiko Koyata of Hirosaki University, the road to success was started by establishing a fast broadband connection in the early 2000s. Today, Kamiyama, with a population of only 5000, is luring an increasing number of businesses and professionals from metropolises such as Tokyo and Osaka. The town will even have its own technical college by early 2023. The popularity of telecommuting has increased during the pandemic, as Japanese companies have been forced to change their highly communal working policies in favor of a more individualistic approach in order to avoid infection. (Koyata 2021.)

It thus seems that the trends of multilocality and telecommuting can offer new growth possibilities for rural regions in both Finland and Japan.

### **Can people freely choose where they live?**

According to Senior Researcher Mika Raunio, Researcher Toni Ahvenainen, and Adjunct Professor Markku Mattila of the Migration Institute of Finland, migration all around the world is characterized by a system that follows a hierarchical logic: the largest cities have the most economic activity and the most lucrative job markets, whereas career opportunities in smaller cities, and especially rural towns and regions, are generally less attractive. The centralization of higher education in larger cities also plays an important part. Many young people must move from their home region out of necessity, even if they would like to stay. For instance, most of the young people who left the Seinäjoki city region did so because the work and study opportunities were better in the more populous Tampere and Helsinki regions. (Raunio et al. 2021; see also Raunio & Mattila 2020.)

The notions of Raunio and colleagues about the functioning of the migration system were clearly visible in the South Korean and Japanese cases.

In South Korea, the COVID-19 pandemic has not resulted in any difference in the urbanization trend of the country. It had even sped up the depopulation of rural regions such as Gyeonbuk, as the economic decline caused by the pandemic has led to a reduction in the industrial jobs there. Even the more distant metropolises, such as the industrial center Daegu,

located in the middle of Gyeongbuk, have been losing an increasing number of their young adults to Seoul, Gyeonggi, and Incheon, which offer better study and career opportunities. The government programs to subsidize return migration have had no effect. According to Professor Sang-woo Park of the Kyungpook National University, the regional disparity in South Korean society continues to grow. (Park 2021.)

In Japan, the government had also introduced special programs to fight the depopulation of rural regions over previous decades. One of these was a home region-oriented experience-based studies program (K-12) for elementary, junior-high, and high schools in the early 2000s. The idea was to increase the attachment of children and youths to their home region, and thus to increase their interest in studying and working there in the future. Professors Young Jun-Lee and Shinichi Hanada from Hiro-saki University had examined the effects of this K-12 study program by conducting a large-scale survey of the students of Hiro-saki University (n=1265) during the second year of the pandemic in 2021. The results revealed that the regionally oriented education program had only a slight impact on the local attachment of the young students. Family factors and employment necessities played a more important role. (Lee & Hanada 2021.)

## **Summing it up**

It seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has not brought about any major shift in the intermunicipal migration systems in Japan, Finland, or South Korea. There were, however, some positive signs, such as the increasing rate of multilocality and telecommuting in Finland and Japan, which can lead to more balanced regional development. However, it is still too early to say anything definitive regarding this trend, and further follow-up studies are needed.

Despite these positive signals, changing the big picture of a migration system is difficult. However, with social innovations of a new kind, such as those featuring small-town urbanism, well-functioning job markets, and the development of remote work opportunities, rural cities can also grow and flourish. (Raunio et al. 2021.)

In the future, it would be interesting to analyze the development policies of Gyeongbuk and South Ostrobothnia, Aomori Prefecture, the cities of

Seinäjäki and Hirosaki, and the town of Kamiyama and exchange ideas between scholars and regional developers in order to identify good practices and create social innovations aimed at turning the tide of intermunicipal migration towards a more favorable outcome for these rural regions and municipalities.

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