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Shengcong CAI

Laboratory of Food and Agricultural Policies, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Graduate School of Bioresource and Bioenvironmental Sciences, Kyushu University

WATANABE, Takaaki

Laboratory of Food and Agricultural Policies, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Faculty of Agriculture, Kyushu University

ISODA, Hiroshi

Laboratory of Food and Agricultural Policies, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Faculty of Agriculture, Kyushu University

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The Path to Endogenous Development in Rural Areas: An Analysis Based on the Empowerment Process

Shengcong CAI^{1*}, Takaaki WATANABE and Hiroshi ISODA

Laboratory of Food and Agricultural Policies, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics,
Faculty of Agriculture, Kyushu University, Fukuoka 819–0395, Japan

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This study examined the process of endogenous development in rural areas through the lens of empowerment, using a case study of the Ota area in Kitsuki City, Japan. The research revealed a multi-dimensional empowerment process occurring across four levels: key persons, organization, the rural community, and individual residents (all local residents). The study identified a chain of empowerment, where self-empowerment of key persons promotes the empowerment of resident organization, which in turn facilitates community empowerment, ultimately leading to the empowerment of all local residents. This process is characterized by iterative phases of integration and participation. The research highlights the crucial role of interaction between administrative bodies and local communities in supporting endogenous development. While emphasizing residents' self-help efforts, the study demonstrates that appropriate administrative support is essential for sustainable rural development. The Ota area case illustrates how combining top-down policy support with bottom-up community-led initiatives can lead to effective local revitalization. While this case provides a potential model for endogenous development in other rural areas, the unique socio-economic background and cultural traditions of each area must be considered. The study contributes to the academic discourse on rural endogenous development in Japan and offers practical insights for formulating and implementing rural revitalization strategies.

Key words: Community participation, Empowerment, Endogenous rural development, Resident Organization, Rural revitalization

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas in Japan are currently facing enormous challenges, including population decline, economic stagnation, and fiscal pressures. These challenges are not only interconnected but also mutually reinforcing. One of the root causes of these problems is population decline (Japan Policy Council, 2014), which is further exacerbated in rural areas by population outflow in addition to natural decrease. The reduction in population and economic activity leads to reduced tax revenues for local governments which, coupled to an increasing number of elderly people requiring health care and social services, further places strain on local government finances (Dilley *et al.*, 2022). Under these circumstances, the concept of “self-help” by local communities and residents has gained importance among activists, academics and national government (Dilley *et al.*, 2017; 2022).

The decentralization and Trinity Reform [Japanese: San-mi ittai kaikaku] promoted from the early 2000s

aimed to increase the autonomy of local governments, but also reduced fiscal transfers from the central government, imposing financial burdens on local areas. These “2000-type Japanese neoliberal reforms” (Kikuchi, 2016) faced numerous criticisms. While the essence of these reforms was the transfer of responsibility for local welfare from the central government to local governments, critics argued that neoliberal fiscal reforms ended the traditional system of tax redistribution from the state to rural areas, essentially “cutting off and throwing away rural areas of Japan (Love, 2013)” and “leaving them to face a slow death that seems natural and inevitable” (Love, 2007).

Against this backdrop, various municipalities have established “Basic Ordinances for Local Autonomy (BOLA)¹ [Japanese: Jichi kihon jorei]” and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications [Japanese: Sōmushō] has promoted the establishment of Regional Management Organizations (RMOs)² [Japanese: Chiiki un'ei soshiki]. These initiatives aim to promote autonomous local development by encouraging resident participation and strengthening cooperation with the governments. However, there is also criticism that true local autonomy in decentralization theory should be achieved through residents' self-help efforts and not imposed by the state.

¹ Laboratory of Food and Agricultural Policies, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, Graduate School of Bioresource and Bioenvironmental Sciences, Kyushu University, Fukuoka 819–0395, Japan

* Corresponding author (E-mail: shengcong.cai@yahoo.com)

¹ Over the past 20 years, many local governments (prefectures and municipalities) have enacted BOLA, also called “local constitutions”. These ordinances clearly state the policies for “resident participation” and “cooperation with administration” in local autonomy. Even in regions that have not enacted basic ordinances for local autonomy, some have enacted “Basic Ordinances for Local Assembly,” which are also efforts to strengthen the relationship between administration and residents. As of October 1, 2023, the number of local governments implementing BOLA was 409, the number of Basic Ordinances for Local Assembly enacted was 1,012, compared to the total number of municipalities in Japan, which was 1,741 (Public Policy Institute, 2024).

Endogenous development was proposed by the United Nations in the 1970s as “another development” in response to various global challenges caused by modernization. In Japan, Tsurumi and Kawata (1989) and Miyamoto (1989) criticized the exogenous development (externally-driven development) led by the government and corporations at the time and advocated for endogenous development. They emphasized making local residents the main actors in development and respecting the diversity of local development, culture, and traditions.

In recent years, the practice of endogenous development has been widely promoted in Europe. Examples include the shift of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) towards rural development in the 1990s and projects such as LEADER³. The core and theoretical extensions of endogenous development have been complemented by much empirical research in European academia. Endogenous development refers to a bottom-up approach (Ray 2000 & 2008; Margarian 2011; Yin and Rui 2023; Neumeier 2012; High and Nemes 2007), emphasizing the importance of local actors in local development decision-making. In other words, it is crucial to implement local activities aimed at improving village living standards based on decisions made by the local community (Slee 1994; Mirosław 2020). As Martin and Sunley (1996) point out, endogenous development is synonymous with “Local Based.” However, Ward (2005) argues that endogenous development is not a realistic paradigm in the globalized rural economy. The need for a hybrid model that goes beyond endogenous and exogenous modeling has been advocated. Ray (1998; 2000) introduced the term “neo-endogenous development,” proposing an approach to rural development that is locally rooted but outward-looking. Odagiri (2018) also emphasizes strengthening local endogeneity through “external interactions” in Japan’s rural endogenous development, particularly through interactions with urban areas (external entities) that serve as a mirror effect, enabling rural areas to gain deeper recognition of their regional characteristics. He further states that external actors are necessary for neo-endogenous development, although the factors and specific scale of these factors do not necessarily coincide between Japan and Europe.

Many studies on neo-endogenous development directly or indirectly emphasize the importance of empowerment (Georgios *et al* 2021; Marango *et al* 2021; Bosworth *et al* 2020; Steiner and Farmer 2018; Bosworth *et al* 2016; Margarian 2013; Shucksmith 2010). In Japan, top-down empowerment of rural areas by the government, such as promoting autonomy and establishing

RMOs, has become an important means to promote endogenous development (Shinkai 2013). However, this alone cannot trigger endogenous development in rural areas. The possibility of endogenous development in rural areas, which tend to be structurally disadvantaged compared to urban areas due to various constraints such as economy, geography, population, and industrial development, is being questioned. Specifically, there are challenges in how rural residents can realize “self-help,” form resident-led initiatives, and achieve local revitalization through autonomous decision-making by residents. When rural areas develop their own revitalization plans, the next challenge is how to implement them. As a solution, the process of capacity building is emphasized. For example, effective integration of diverse resources within the rural area or promotion of local development through appropriate introduction of external support (new concept of endogenous development) are mentioned. These efforts are essentially linked to the concept of empowerment. Research on the empowerment process can potentially lead to effective solutions to the above challenges. However, the practical implementation of the concept of endogenous development from the perspective of empowerment has not yet been sufficiently studied in the Japanese context.

This research examines how endogenous development manifests through empowerment processes in rural Japan, providing a new perspective on how rural areas can build capacity and take charge of their own development. This approach is particularly important in the current policy environment aimed at strengthening local autonomy and self-governance.

METHODOLOGY

Adams (2017) defines empowerment as “the ability to control one’s situation, exercise power, and achieve one’s own goals.” In local revitalization, it means residents themselves becoming the main actors in managing the rural area and realizing revitalization goals. Generally, when examining the empowerment process of an area, it is paradigmatic to consider three dimensions: individual, organization, and community. This approach examines how the empowerment process unfolds at each dimension and what impact it has. (Douglas 2010, Shen 2018). Adams (2017) expanded this to four dimensions – self-empowerment, individual empowerment, organizational empowerment, and community empowerment – in social worker research. While both self and individual refer to the individual level, “self”

² According to the definition by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, RMOs refer to organizations established to respond to situations where people face inconveniences in terms of livelihood and life functions, especially in hilly and mountainous areas or depopulated areas, in the context of Japan’s aging and declining population. To respond to these situations, community organizations formed primarily by people living in the area have started to develop projects (comprehensive life support services) that support life functions. These initiatives aim to protect the livelihoods of the area. As of 2022, the total number of RMOs nationwide in Japan were 7,207. Retrieved April 22, 2024, from https://www.soumu.go.jp/menu_news/s-news/01gyosei09_02000026.html (Japanese).

³ The LEADER approach, introduced in Europe in the early 1990s, was a new strategy for rural development. It aimed to address rural issues by empowering local communities, rather than relying on top-down policies. LEADER (an acronym derived from the French phrase “Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale”, meaning “Links between actions for rural development” in French) encouraged local people and organizations from public, private, and civil sectors to form Local Action Groups. These groups were given the power and resources to shape their area’s development, fostering a bottom-up approach to rural economic growth.

more specifically refers to an individual's increased ability and willingness to empower others (other-oriented) after pursuing self-empowerment (self-oriented) (Adams 2017: p17 & p82).

Having established these theoretical dimensions of empowerment, it is worth examining their applicability in Japan. In practice, BOLA clearly define residents' primary position and right to participate. The activity range of RMOs often corresponds to former elementary school districts (roughly equivalent to former village areas that disappeared during the Heisei municipal mergers [Japanese: Heisei gappei]). However, mergers have created a disconnect between residents and local governments. This activity range includes activities for children and the elderly and can maintain face-to-face relationships. This allows for the establishment of a system where local residents can think and act for themselves, leading to sustainable community development. From these practices, empowerment in Japan can also be understood in three dimensions: individual, resident organization, and community (range and human relationships determined by historical conditions).

Moreover, Tsurumi (1996) emphasized the importance of key persons in endogenous development. In many current community-building cases, there are key persons in the region, including support personnel from outside the region (Zushi 2014). These key persons have special skills from past life experiences or work experiences, are willing to participate in community building, and can involve other local residents in community activities. Therefore, this study adopts the four dimensions of Adams (2017) and Yue (2023), defined as follows to fit the Japanese context:

1. Self-empowerment of key persons: They have improved their own abilities and built social relationship networks from personal experiences. They are willing and able to participate in community activities themselves and lead others to do so.
2. Empowerment of resident organization: Residents participate in organizational activities to engage in community building in a more powerful form.
3. Empowerment of rural community: Newly constructing social institutions and management systems in rural areas to enable residents to manage rural areas independently and effectively.
4. Empowerment of individual residents: Improvement of life and capacity building at the individual level for more residents in the rural area (ideally including all residents) through participation in community activities.

While the results of empowerment are as described above, these results were not achieved in a short period. It is a complex process, and at this point, it is not possible to assert a definitive path to empowerment results. However, according to Slavič (2022) and Storey (1999), two preliminary stages are necessary to realize empowerment: integration and participation. This trend is also observed in Japan. Current policies call for local resi-

dents to participate in community building⁴ [Japanese: Chiiki-zukuri], and the current approach to community building is also referred to as "participatory community building."

1. Integration: Promoting the involvement of stakeholders in the rural area (not limited to the agricultural sector even in rural areas) in local revitalization activities. Specifically, this involves institutionally and systematically connecting various entities, resources, and functions within the rural area to create new platforms and venues where residents can participate.
2. Participation: Residents directly involve themselves in their own local revitalization process. Participation aims to go beyond mere formal participation, allowing local residents to substantially and effectively reflect their opinions and be involved in decision-making within the constructed platforms and venues.
3. Realization of empowerment (The empowerment of the above four dimensions).

Moreover, this resident-led local revitalization is a new endeavor for both residents and administration. Therefore, this activity is a process where the rural area accumulates small successful experiences, gradually expanding from a few to many, from small scale to large scale. The stages of integration and participation are also repeated processes.

Regarding the direction of empowerment, the theory of endogenous development emphasizes that rural areas rely on their own strength to realize empowerment. On the other hand, Bosworth (2016) and Yin (2023) believe that top-down empowerment can also effectively promote this process. For example, giving power to residents in policies that promote resident autonomy can be understood as top-down empowerment, but this alone cannot realize endogenous development. Therefore, attention should also be paid to the interaction between top-down and bottom-up approaches in realizing rural empowerment.

In summary, this research positions rural empowerment as an important means to resist rural decline and realize endogenous development. However, its mechanism is still not clear. Based on the above theory and examination of Japan's current policies, four dimensions of empowerment have been set. To realize empowerment, it is necessary to go through two stages of integration and participation, and these stages often exist multiple times in practice. In other words, the rural empowerment process cannot be achieved overnight. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the interaction between government and the rural area throughout this entire process (see Fig. 1).

The specific objectives of this research are the following three interrelated points:

1. To analyze in detail the practical process of endogenous development in rural areas through case studies, revealing the multi-dimensional nature of empowerment as described above.

⁴ In the current Japanese context, "community building: chiiki-zukuri" is often used synonymously with "local revitalization" in many situations.

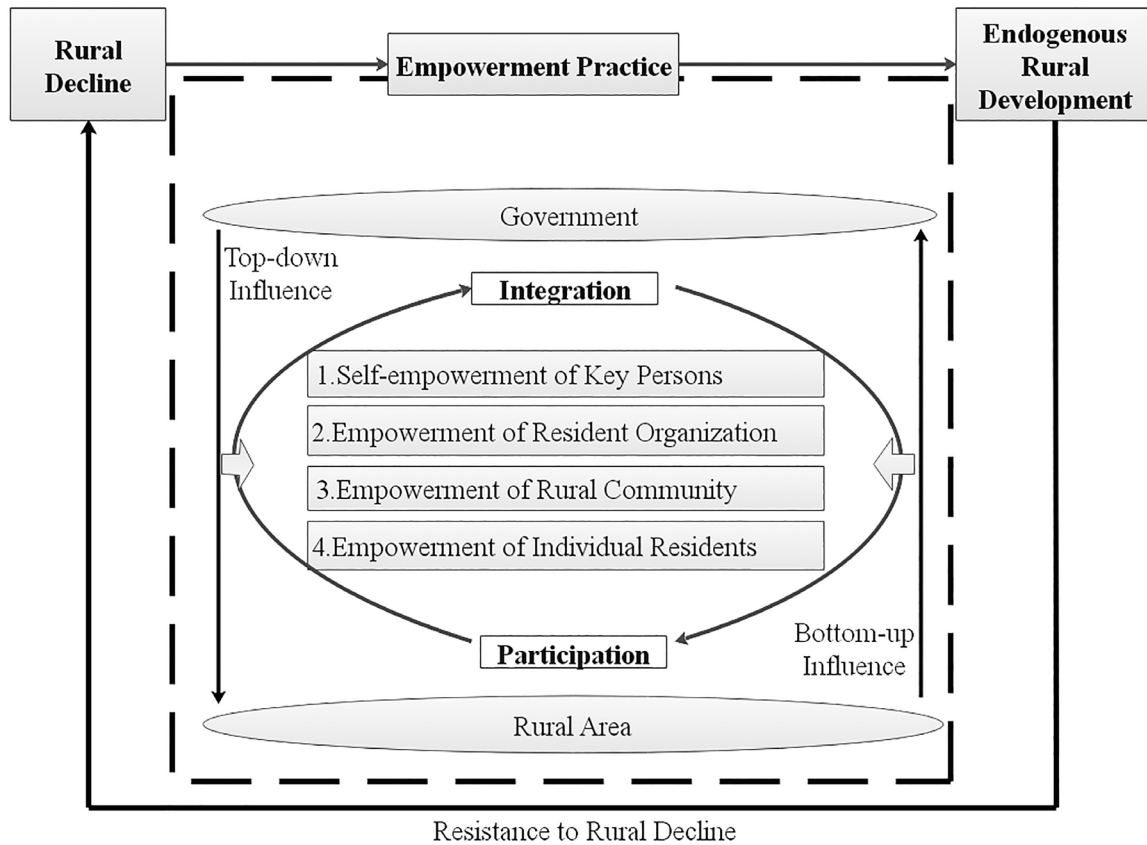


Fig. 1. Research Framework.

2. To explore the specific manifestations of government and local interactions (both top-down and bottom-up), integration, and participation as factors promoting rural empowerment.

3. Based on the above analysis results, to construct a theoretical framework for an empowerment-based approach towards realizing endogenous development in rural areas of Japan.

By achieving these objectives, this research aims to contribute to the academic discussion on rural endogenous development in Japan and contribute to the formulation and implementation of practical rural revitalization strategies. Furthermore, these research findings are expected to facilitate the practical application of theoretical frameworks in forming sustainable rural areas tailored to the Japanese context.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Development of the “Resident Autonomy” System in Kitsuki City, Oita Prefecture

In April 2013, the Kitsuki City Council enacted the “Kitsuki City Basic Ordinance for Local Autonomy” as the highest norm at the local level for community development, stipulating that citizens are the main actors in community building. The ordinance also clearly defined the roles and obligations of citizens, administration, and the council. However, according to Sugiyama (2014), who surveyed BOLA across Japan, while these ordinances are enacted independently by each region, their

uniqueness is strongly reflected only in the content of the preamble, with the structure and content of the articles being common nationwide. In other words, local governments do not have specific measures or experiences regarding resident-led community building. The ordinance is merely a symbolic representation of local autonomy, which aims to have residents living in the region take responsibility for deciding local matters, advocating for “local sovereignty.”

Municipal mergers were completed throughout Oita Prefecture in 2005. From 2010, Kitsuki City began promoting the establishment of “Resident Autonomy Councils” (RACs) [Japanese: Jūmin jichi kyōgikai] to address increasingly complex and diverse local issues. With the idea that “we build our own region ourselves,” they expected to solve local issues through cooperation between administration and residents. RACs are community-based organizations that facilitate collaboration between local residents and various functional entities to address local issues. These councils, which exemplify participatory governance at the grassroots level, are categorized as a specific type of RMOs, a broader classification encompassing community-led initiatives for local development and management. They were established in 13 districts of Kitsuki City (roughly corresponding to elementary school districts).

In 2016, the Kitsuki City Hall [Japanese: Shiyakusho] reorganized the administrative department (Planning and Finance Division) that had been supporting the RACs into the “Collaborative Community Development

Division (CCDD)” and established the “Guidelines for Collaborative Community Development.” The guidelines clearly identified citizens⁵, local resident organizations, civic activity organizations, and local government as the main actors in community building. These guidelines complement the BOLA and clarify how the local government should support citizens in promoting citizen-led community building. The enactment of the “Kitsuki City Basic Ordinance (BOLA),” the establishment of RACs based on administrative initiatives and the formulation of the “Guidelines for Collaborative Community Development” can be seen as the government setting parameters in advance for the local endogenous development. In other words, an administrative framework was formed to position the RACs as the main resident organizations in each elementary school district area within the city, build cooperative relationships between government and residents, and jointly promote community building. In terms of administrative practice, there is still a need to adjust or formulate more detailed policies and support activities according to the actual situation of each area. Therefore, this can be said to be a long-term process requiring active efforts from both the administrative side and the grassroots level of the area.

Currently, one of the policies put forward by the mayor of Kitsuki City is to advance community development by collaborating with the RACs as a “second town hall [Japanese: Daini no yakuba].”⁶ The staff of the administrative department CCDD also maintain the principle of “working together on an equal footing to address local issues,” communicating with the RACs and building cooperative relationships. Furthermore, the administrative department provides grants every year to support the independent operation of the 13 RACs in the city. The total amount of grants in 2023 was 12,130,000 yen, divided into two types: (a) Operation Promotion Grants and (b) Collaborative Project Grants⁷. The Collaborative Project Grants started from fiscal year 2022, with the administration expecting to expand the projects (functions) of the RACs through methods like commissioned projects, that is, limiting the direction of projects while not restricting their content. Drawing on successful examples from districts where RACs have performed well, the administration aims to expand these practices throughout the city. It is hoped that organizations like

RACs can contribute to areas such as elderly welfare, health, and environment by building a collaborative system that encourages them to use their own strength to identify and address local issues.

Ota Hometown Development Council (OHDC) [Japanese: Ōta furusato-zukuri kyōgikai]

Under this collaborative system born from the background of decentralization, after the legal positioning and self-responsibility of local residents in community development were pushed to a high level, we aim to clarify whether residents can truly exhibit their creativity, become empowered, and manage the rural area themselves, how they acquire this ability, and what problems exist through the analysis of advanced cases within Kitsuki City.

The subject of this research is the Ota area of Kitsuki City, which has undergone three mergers (the Meiji merger [Municipal mergers like Heisei merger] in 1889, the Showa merger [Municipal mergers] in 1954, and the Heisei merger in 2005). As of March 31, 2023, the population was 1,085, with an aging rate reaching 55%. The OHDC was established in April 2010. The basic structure of the OHDC consists of a board of directors, Local Promotion/Health and Welfare Department, and Youth/Living Environment Department, with all resident groups⁸ in the Ota area joining. From an organizational perspective, the OHDC formally integrated the area, but due to lack of experience at the time of its establishment, the initial activities of the OHDC were centered on events for local exchange, basically an extension of previous public hall activities (the stage of the first Ota area revitalization plan in Fig. 2). However, currently, the OHDC is identifying specific local issues and developing steady local revitalization activities that spread from welfare aspects to the local economy (the stage of the second Ota area revitalization plan in Fig. 2).

The catalyst for this transformation was the full-scale engagement in visiting activities for the elderly in 2018 when the OHDC accepted the “Ota Area Elderly Life Difficulty Information Collection Project” (DICP) from the Kitsuki City Social Welfare Council (KCSWC). Faced with much specific and realistic information about the area’s disadvantages and difficulties collected, reflection and learning took place within the OHDC, resulting

⁵ The term citizen [Japanese: shimin] is used in the ordinance, although this usage is also debated in Japan regarding its definition. However, in this ordinance, it certainly includes rural residents as well, so here “shimin” is equivalent to “residents”.

⁶ The term “second town hall [Japanese: Daini no yakuba]” refers to a coined phrase expressing the expectation that by advancing the multi-functionalization of existing resident autonomy organizations and local groups, and through their collaboration, the range of public and beneficial activities will be expanded, responding to the diversifying and complexifying needs of residents. It expresses the expectation that such organizations and activities will become like another city hall.

⁷ (a) Operation Promotion Grants are for projects carried out by RACs to continue operations and promote collaborative community development. Within this, 300,000 yen is paid per autonomy council. Additionally, if the council is implementing a self-created local revitalization plan, 250,000 yen is paid, and if it’s in the process of formulation, 150,000 yen is paid. (b) Collaborative Project Grants are divided into 5 projects: (i) Elderly support project; (ii) Disaster prevention project; (iii) Health promotion project; (iv) Obstacle tree removal project; (v) Startup support project (for new initiatives, etc.).

⁸ Local groups joining the OHDC include: Chamber of Commerce, Health Promotion Committee, Ota Youth Association, Kitsuki City Staff Ota Association, Tutoring school, Public Hall Management Advisory Council, Doge-kai Ota, Council of Welfare Commissioners and Children’s Committee, Sports Association, District Resident Representatives, Ota Promotion Division, Ota Children’s Garden, Ota Elementary School PTA, Kitsuki City Disaster Prevention Expert Association, District Head Federation, Youth Healthy Development Council, Ota Elementary School, Senior Citizens’ Club Federation, Buddha’s Village Safety Patrol Team, Kitsuki City Fire Brigade First Platoon, Ota Central Public Hall.

YEAR				"First Ota Area Revitalization Plan"						"Second Ota Area Revitalization Plan"				
	2009	2010	...	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Activities & Plans	Establishment Preparation of OHDC (Explanatory meetings, preparatory meetings, etc.)	Established	New Year Gift Set Distribution Project for Elderly Living Alone											
			"Sweat Potato Digging Exchange" Event											
			First-Grade Elementary School Entrance Celebration Event											
			"Rice Planting Exchange"Event											
			Ota Walking Festival											
			"¥100 Sale"Event											
			Supports for pupils walking to school											
			Road Cleaning Campaign											
			Launch of Ota Region Website and Dissemination of Local Information											
			Ota Newsletter Publication Project											
			"Coming of Age Celebration" Event											
			Organizing Crime Prevention Seminars											
			Kids Care											
			Ota Area Elderly Life Difficulty Information Collection Project (2018/12)											
			Ota Area Community "Senior Watch Network" Project(2020/11/02)											
			Local Coordination System for Disaster Response(2021/01)											
			Ota Area Mutual Aid Project(2021/10/18)											
			Elderly Residents Watch Project(2021/04/21)											
			Gasoline Station Continuation Project(2022/02/01)											
			Development of Migration Support System											
			Promotion of English Language Learning Environment											
			Development of a Seasonal Sensory Environment and Art Village Creation											
			Preservation and Continuation of Local Festivals and Events(Rural Cinema,Traditional Festivals including the Doburoku Festival,etc.)											
			Development of Regional Human Resources											

independent financial resources, recognizing the necessity of volunteer activities including paid volunteer activities, and positioning the activities of the autonomy council. This initiative was not only meaningful for the area but also became a process of further self-empowerment for key persons who wanted to spread this paid volunteer activity. Furthermore, through this practice, Ms. A was able to grasp the challenges of paid volunteer activities at the practical stage and the residents' perceptions of such activities.

With this background, the OMAP was launched around October 2021. As shown in Fig. 3, the specific content of the project is that local energetic elderly people support daily life difficulties such as cleaning, grass mowing, grave cleaning, shopping, and taking out garbage for households with only elderly people or elderly people living alone aged 80 or above (139 households as of October 2021). Ms. A also actively participates in this project, demonstrating her ability to communicate well with residents. The secretariat is handled by Ms. A, and its operating costs are also borne by the KCSWC. According to Mr. B (a staff member of the Kitsuki City Ota Promotion Division and another key person in the OHDC), "It would be good if we could set up a secretariat within the OHDC, but we lack sufficient funds to maintain it. There is a pressing need for the government to establish comprehensive support systems that enable the effective management of the RACs. Currently, the burden is falling on Ms. A of the KCSWC."

The OMAP is a unique local revitalization project developed centered on the OHDC. For the OHDC, which had previously only been responsible for consultation functions and hosting local events, this required a process of capacity enhancement, that is, organizational empowerment.

First, securing independent financial resources was of paramount importance. After the OHDC proposed this initiative, support was received from residents and groups both within and outside the area. This includes membership fees from local residents, specifically annual fees (500 yen) from service users and providers. Also, as

operational profit from the project, service users pay 800 yen per hour, of which 700 yen is paid as remuneration to service providers. The difference of 100 yen is used for casualty insurance premiums and secretariat expenses.

Furthermore, at the initial establishment of the project, there was support in the form of activity grants from Kitsuki City, but the use of these grants was restricted and could not be used for labor remuneration for service providers or secretariat officials. From outside the area, individuals and groups sympathetic to the purpose of this project also provided supporting membership fees or support funds, actively participating. Thanks to these funds, the OHDC was able to purchase a large grass mower (operated by 3–4 people).

Second, securing human resources and establishing organizational structure was crucial. Within the OHDC, the "Ota Help Squad" (service provision entity) was formed as the activity body. Fortunately, there are many excellent human resources in the Ota area who want to contribute to the area, and under the call of Ms. A and the OHDC, they actively participated in this local revitalization activity that was in the conceptual stage. First, Mr. C, the vice-chairman of the OHDC, deeply recognized the reality that "it is the residents themselves who protect the area," and was moved by the efforts of Ms. A and Mr. B so far, and accepted the position of squad leader of the "Ota Help Squad"¹¹. At the time of its launch, 15 active elderly people from the area participated. Among them, many were people who had once left the area and returned after retirement, or who had returned with their spouses. Mr. C himself is a U-turn migrant¹² who returned to the Ota area about 10 years ago after retirement, and he believes that "the countryside is best for living. The seasonal mountain ranges, wind, and flowers can only be understood by living there." Mr. C served as the accountant for the Nagamatsu district of the Ota area for 2 years, then as the district head for 2 years, and is currently the vice-chairman of the OHDC and the chairman of the district head association. Another identity of those U-turn resi-

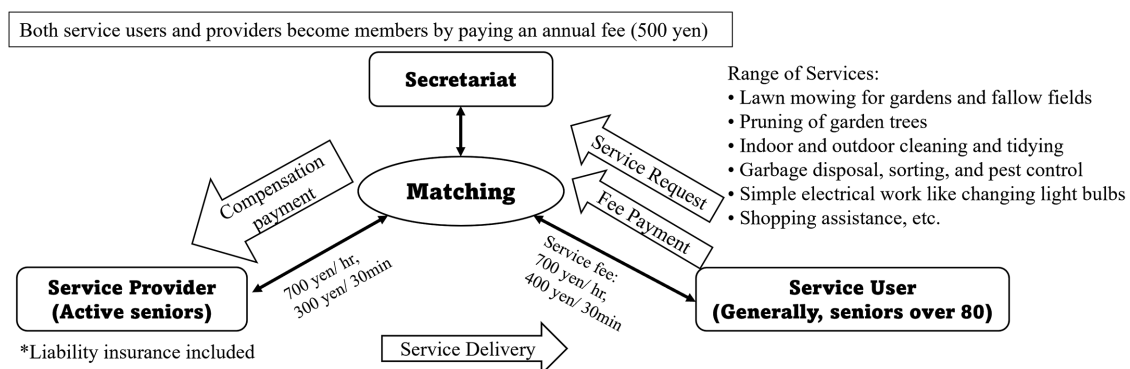


Fig. 3. Structure of the OMAP.

Source: Own survey and information

¹¹ Mr. C stated, "If this is the idea, I must participate. Ms. A and Mr. B are working so hard, if I don't join this flow, there will be no hope for the local development." From this thought, Mr. C accepted the role of squad leader.

dents is that they are members of the Ota Area U-turn Group (13 members as of May 2021). Centered on the 60–80 age group, they have returned to Ota after being away for decades due to employment, mainly returning after retirement to care for their parents or manage their family homes. Being back in their hometown after a long time, they had few acquaintances and tended to be reclusive. “Why don’t we start by interacting with people in the same situation?” With the call from Ms. A of the social welfare council, they gathered and started their first activity in April 2021, making udon noodles as a hobby activity. For new local activities to be smoothly developed in the area and gain approval from residents, Mr. C’s own human relationships also played a big role. This is because Mr. C’s father was a local artificial insemination technician who “everyone knew.”

Finally, these efforts led to significant outcomes. After Ms. A’s proposal, with funding support from inside and outside the area and active participation of human resources within the area, the OHDC acquired the ability to realize its vision. With the council as the core, this initiative spread throughout the entire area. Concurrently, local residents developed confidence in the OHDC and engaged in its activities as service users. This formed a sustainable resident mutual aid system within the area. As of September 2024, the number of mutual aid squad members has increased to 30, and the number of service cases has increased from 5 cases (total cost 108,000 yen) during the founding period in 2021 to 20 cases annually (total cost 263,000 yen) in 2023. However, since local welfare commissioners (one of the constituent groups of the OHDC) within the area regularly visit elderly people in the area and help solve life difficulties as much as possible, it is not always necessary to make reservations for services offered by the OMAP. Therefore, it is believed that the actual number of mutual aid cases in the Ota area far exceeds 20 cases. The construction of such a sustainable mutual aid system has made it possible to create a livable environment. This local system and the improvement in local living environment it brings promote the empowerment of the area and equip residents themselves with the potential ability to realize local revitalization.

Gasoline Station Continuation Project (GSCP)

Background of Project Development

In the Ota area, it was expected that “K Oil”, the last gasoline station (GS) in the Ota area, would close by June 2022, raising serious concerns about the impact on daily life. Kerosene delivery to the elderly and households without cars would become impossible, and farmers, construction businesses, welfare facilities, school buses, and local self-employed individuals would have to travel to distant GSs. Furthermore, this situation was

expected to hinder the implementation of local settlement and migration initiatives. In a survey by the OHDC in the winter of 2019, about half of the households using kerosene (60–70) responded that they would be troubled by this situation, and the OHDC decided to address the continuation of the local GS as a major local issue.

Development Process of the Project

The key person for the success of this project is Mr. B. At the time of the survey, Mr. B was serving as the head of the Ota Promotion Division, having developed excellent organizational skills and execution ability from his long administrative experience. On the other hand, he experienced the consolidation of his alma mater T Elementary School 10 years ago and felt powerless as an administrative staff member who could do nothing, which led to his strong desire to protect his hometown. After achieving self-empowerment through these experiences, Mr. B became a central figure in the OHDC, leading members to engage in local revitalization.

On October 26, 2020, the Ota Promotion Division (led by Mr. B), Oita Oil Co., Ltd., and the Ota Youth Association discussed the possibility of kerosene delivery within the area, especially to elderly people who need support for shopping, in the form of “kerosene delivery using 90 l storage tanks,” an initiative of the Ota Youth Association in 2015. However, Oita Oil suggested that a minimum of 200 households using kerosene delivery would be necessary considering profitability issues. This led the council to devise a survey on the desire for kerosene delivery within the Ota area, explaining the background to the Ota Area District Chiefs’ Association [Japanese: Ōta chiiki kuchōkai] and obtaining approval for the survey. The proposal for the “kerosene delivery using 90 l storage tanks” initiative was distributed as a notice to all households through district head documents at the end of December, and a desire survey was conducted. To continue the project, the goal was set to add about 100 new households in addition to the current 100. However, by January 19, 2021, the tally showed only 35 new households expressing interest. Therefore, they requested calls for support for the initiative to resolve local inconvenience with the “spirit of local mutual aid,” and again circulated documents (with “Check the Council Newsletter” written at the beginning to draw residents’ attention), extending the survey deadline to February 26. In the second survey, 84 new households participated, with 60 of them expressing their intention to install new tanks. Subsequently, Oita Oil Co., Ltd. expressed its intention to fully cooperate with facility startup support and operational support for the kerosene delivery business but hoped that the operation would be carried out locally. In response, the OHDC took on the responsibility of operating the local GS.

¹² U-turn migrant (Japanese: Yū-tān-sha) refers to an individual who returns to their rural hometown or region of origin after having lived and worked in an urban area for a significant period, typically for education or employment. The concept of U-turn migration holds considerable importance in Japanese demographic research and rural revitalization policies. This significance stems from the potential of these returnees to contribute new skills, experiences, and perspectives to their home communities, thereby potentially aiding in rural development efforts.

On March 18 and April 1, 2021, meetings were held with the Ota Promotion Division, Oita Oil Co., Ltd., the Ota Youth Association, and the Kitsuki City Fire Department, deciding on the renovation of K Oil's underground tank (renovation cost: 4,840,000 yen). In making this decision, they explained the purpose of the project and the difficulties faced by local residents to Mr. K of K Oil, obtaining his consent to use the K Oil site while retaining Mr. K's name. Subsequently, they considered establishing a legal entity and identified three challenges: securing the operating entity, securing personnel with Hazardous Materials Engineer License, Class B, Category 4 (HMEL-B4) [Japanese: Kiken-butsu Toriatsukai-sha Otsu-shu Dai-yon-rui], and securing operating funds.

On September 15, 2021, a meeting was held to discuss the continuation of the GS. Of the 24 local businesses, 19 participated, and while there were severe opinions on fundraising, selling prices, and management, in the end, a positive willingness to cooperate was shown, and the meeting concluded. On September 24, 2021, at the board meeting of the OHDC, a policy for the council to take the lead in operation was approved. Mr. B systematically organized meetings among diverse local stakeholders, including individual residents, the OHDC-affiliated groups, and external organizations, thereby fostering collaborative initiatives. This enabled the OHDC to gain broader local support and develop the ability to address and resolve critical local challenges.

In terms of funding, considerable initial investment was needed. Most of this was to be used for replacing expired underground oil tanks and repairing aging facilities, which was also the main reason why GSs across the country were forced to close one after another. Ms. A learned about hometown tax crowdfunding¹³ from the city's person in charge, and although she was unfamiliar

with it at first, she put all her effort into it as there was a possibility of gathering funds. As a result of posting an attractive appeal on the website, she achieved results beyond expectations (see Table 1). Furthermore, national treasury subsidies, subsidies from Kitsuki City Hall and Oita Prefecture, as well as self-funding from local companies and residents were also collected. As a result, on November 26, 2021, with the support of the Kitsuki City Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the limited liability company "Ota Mura" was established. The employees include Mr. and Mrs. K (unpaid) and 5 elderly people, with wages at the local minimum wage of 830 yen per hour. All employees have obtained the HMHL-B4. Among them, three are members of the U-turn migrant group who obtained the HMHL-B4 during their company employee days and are cooperating in the operation of the GS. The discovery of these three people was by chance. It came to light when Ms. A was talking with the U-turn migrant group about the GSCP, and they also actively expressed their willingness to contribute to the revitalization of their hometown. The OHDC has evolved from a voluntary organization with a consultative nature of local resident organizations to establishing the limited liability company "Ota Mura", which has legal status and the ability to solve actual local issues. In the future, the OHDC was also considering developing community-building projects such as migration and settlement measures and inheritance of traditional culture as a legalized entity.

Currently, the GS is selling gasoline and providing kerosene delivery services in the Ota area. The continuation of the GS has allowed residents of the Ota area, which is prone to heavy rain and earthquakes and has a severe aging population, to live without worry. Although the business is not profitable, it manages to continue operations. This is mainly due to the efforts of local resi-

Table 1. Funding Composition (in thousands of yen) for the Establishment of the limited liability company "Ota Mura"

Funding Composition		
Type	Amount	Source of Funds
1. Own Funds	498	Local businesses, residents
2. Subsidies		
2.1 National Treasury Subsidy	5,300	National government
2.2 Kerosene Delivery Business Subsidy	NA	Kitsuki City Office (20/100 subsidy); Oita Prefecture (75/100 subsidy)
3. Donations	8,431	Furusato-Tax Crowdfunding
		Donation period: 2021/11/25 – 2022/2/23;
	Target amount:	Purpose: Underground tank renovation; Number of donors: 240 people;
	4,000	

Source: Own survey

¹³ Hometown Tax Crowdfunding (GCF) is a crowdfunding-type hometown tax donation system to support local projects. Donors can make donations to specific projects and designate how their donations are used. The donations are used to solve local issues and for development, and donors can receive tax deductions. Donations can be made from small amounts, and various projects are listed. Retrieved October 14, 2024, from <https://www.furusato-tax.jp/gcf/about> (Japanese)

dents, and even those who initially opposed the project, thinking it would be difficult to run with just the power of residents, are now actively refueling at the station and contributing to the area after its opening. Of course, sustainable operation and achieving profitability remain significant challenges, and there is a need for an attitude of “listening to all opinions and gradually exploring improvement measures” (Ms. A).

DISCUSSIONS

Firstly, through the analysis of the Ota area case, we observed the gradual development of empowerment in the community-building process. As shown in Table 2, this manifested as a four-dimensional empowerment process: the demonstration and cultivation of abilities of key persons represented by Ms. A and Mr. B, the empowerment through the expansion of the OHDC’s capabilities, the empowerment of local community through the realization of local revitalization plans with the OHDC as the core agency, and the final stage of empowerment of the individual residents (all local residents).

The RACs promoted by Kitsuki City Hall provided a

stage for key persons to play active roles. These key persons have cultivated their abilities through past work and life experiences, achieving personal empowerment. At the same time, they have an attachment to the area and the ability and willingness to guide others in the area and contribute to it. Community building cannot be solved by individual power alone; it requires organizing in a way that can more effectively gather and exert local power. In this case, key persons Ms. A and Ms. B, having realized self-empowerment through past experiences, are active in the council. They apply their abilities to community-building projects, proposing, organizing, and participating as leaders in community building. On the one hand, they strengthen cooperation within the council and promote the empowerment of the council by gaining support from local residents and external sources, acquiring the ability to solve local issues. On the other hand, as active participants themselves, they gain further self-empowerment through the participation process, growing as leaders and experts in community building. The active cooperation and involvement of local talents like Mr. C and the U-turn migrant group further promoted the smooth progress of the project and made the council more capable of implementation.

Table 2. Four-Dimensional Empowerment in the Ota Case

Dimensions of Empowerment		In OMAP	In GSCP
1. Self-Empowerment of Key Persons	Self-Empowerment of Key Persons in the Ota Area	• Ms. A’s experience and knowledge accumulated from her previous workplace.	• Mr. B’s own leadership, execution ability, and advantages brought by his position, such as calling for joint participation from related local groups and applying for subsidies from the government. • Ms. A’s own writing skills and regional human network built after working in the Ota area.
	Besides, the Utilization of Active Local Talents’ Abilities	Moreover, they assume a pivotal role in revitalization initiatives, demonstrating a strong propensity for active engagement. Concurrently, their participation in local revitalization efforts serves as a catalyst for further capacity building, self-reinforcing and personal growth. • Mr. C’s own social relationship network in Ota area. • U-turn migrant group members’ attachment to their parents and hometown, sense of contribution.	• U-turn migrant group members’ abilities and qualifications acquired outside the Ota area. • Mr. K’s GS site, equipment (fixed capital) and GS operation experience.
2. Empowerment of Resident Organization	Empowerment of the OHDC	The OHDC raised operating funds on its own and recruited local residents to establish the mutual aid squad.	The OHDC established a limited liability company and maintained the gasoline station in the Ota area.
3. Empowerment of Rural Community	Empowerment of the Ota Rural Community	Formation of an environment suitable for residence (well-received by local residents and children of the elderly)	A locally-owned GS company was realized where residents themselves invest, work, and consume, creating a way for residents to counter local decline with their own strength.
4. Empowerment of Individual Residents	Empowerment of All Residents in the Ota Area	Upon establishing a local mutual aid system, the rural community empowerment of the enables residents to accrue more benefits. The elderly receive necessary care, while residents and local businesses can maintain their normal daily activities and production processes. Moreover, this system encourages broader participation, potentially enhancing the region’s intrinsic capabilities and fostering sustainable local development in the long term.	

Subsequently, the OHDC, functioning as the core agency for local revitalization, implemented various projects and promoted the expansion of the local mutual aid system. Through these efforts, it effectively addressed local issues and counteracted community decline, ultimately facilitating the empowerment of the local community. Actually, as Ando (2018) argues, local development is the growth of the people in the community itself. Building an environment suitable for local development is synonymous with creating an environment that promotes the growth of all local residents individually. Local residents benefit from the empowerment of the community, and as more residents understand and participate in local activities, they jointly build a local mutual aid system. At the individual level of each resident, they improve their lives, enhance their awareness and ability to participate in local revitalization as members of the area, strengthen the overall endogeneity of the area, and realize sustainable endogenous development.

Secondly, the empowerment process of the Ota area itself, which represents an advanced case study in Kitsuki City as mentioned above, encompassed multiple stages of integration and participation. This process involved the gradual realization of empowerment across the four dimensions previously discussed. First, through the commission of the Kitsuki City Hall, various local resident groups in the Ota area cooperated to establish the OHDC in the form of a voluntary organization with the function of residents discussing local issues. Subsequently, key individuals Ms. A and Mr. B, along with other active local talents, actively participated in the OHDC's activities. Their involvement primarily focused on promoting further integration within the OHDC and fostering close cooperation and participation among affiliated groups within the OHDC. This collaborative effort enhanced the OHDC's capacity to address concrete local issues effectively. Furthermore, with the OHDC serving as the core agency, it strategically integrated various resources within the area, catalyzing the development of local revitalization projects and facilitating the expansion of the local mutual aid system. Through proactive engagement and concerted efforts of residents from both within and outside the area, the local living environment and community conditions improved markedly, enhancing residents' quality of life and strengthening the community's resilience against decline. Finally, an increasing number of residents in the area began to benefit from these activities and developed a deeper understanding of the importance of the OHDC and local revitalization efforts. This catalyzed a shift towards more proactive participation of residents, with residents voluntarily engaging in and sustaining the local mutual aid system. Concurrently, through proactive involvement, local residents not only reinforced their identity as protagonists in local development but also augmented their capacity to effectively contribute to and shape their community's trajectory.

The endogenous development of the area heavily depends on the "self-help efforts" of residents, which

can be considered a success of the residents, but it still needs to be realized through effective interaction between the area and the government. Rural regions inherently face multifaceted challenges that place them in a structurally disadvantaged position compared to urban centers. Consequently, to facilitate the empowerment process in these areas, empowerment from the government is still necessary, acting as a catalyst for endogenous rural development or constituting a significant source of external impetus in the rural revitalization process. Under the broader context of fiscal difficulties, shortage of local public servants, the Heisei mergers, and population issues, the government is promoting resident autonomy and the establishment of RMOs, which are comprehensive local resident organizations. This is expected to effectively respond to the currently diversifying challenges of local development under residents' self-help efforts.

In this case, Kitsuki City's enactment of the "Kitsuki City Basic Ordinance" in 2013 and the promotion of establishing RACs within each elementary school district area from 2010 are factual reflections of this major trend. Of course, there is criticism that such policies are merely shifting the responsibility for local development from the administration to the residents. In the case of the Ota area in this study, this indeed became the starting point for endogenous development in the area led by key persons. Evidence indicates that the responsibilities and challenges faced by rural areas have, in fact, intensified. Ensuring the sustainability of endogenous development in these regions requires a dual approach. While the bottom-up, empowerment process of rural areas (as illustrated in the lower section of Fig. 4) is crucial, it is equally imperative to maintain active governmental engagement throughout the developmental continuum. This synergistic approach is essential for fostering resilient and sustainable rural development. The case study presented in this article illustrates this point. Kitsuki City Hall established the "Guidelines for Collaborative Community Development" in 2016, established the CCDD within the government structure, and promoted active engagement between local government and RACs. The government collects local residents' needs and opinions through feedback from the RACs and clarifies what each can do for the rural area and how to build a collaborative system between government and residents through various local revitalization initiatives undertaken by these RACs. Subsequent mayoral policies have further elevated the status of RACs, designating them as "second town halls." Since 2022, numerous commissioned projects have been initiated to expand the functions of RACs in each area. Of course, besides this, as in the case of the GSCP in the Ota area of this study, Kitsuki City Hall should also actively respond to local revitalization ideas and needs, provide support and assistance, and jointly promote local development.

Therefore, this case underscores that in the endogenous development of rural areas, the government serves as a crucial external stakeholder. It should maintain active engagement with rural area throughout all stages

of development, remaining receptive to feedback and providing necessary support. In other words, as emphasized and supported by Odagiri (2018) in the public domain expansion type rural revitalization model, the responsibility of the administration should never be reduced. Odagiri contrasts this model with the small government type, where reduced administrative responsibility is offset by expanded resident (or RMOs) responsibility, maintaining a constant total responsibility. Conversely, the public domain expansion type maintains administrative responsibility while increasing resident (RMOs) involvement, thus expanding total responsibility. This approach acknowledges that, especially in rural areas, it is exceedingly difficult to reverse local decline solely through internal capabilities without external empowerment or governmental support. Indeed, rural decline is not exclusively a result of local factors but rather a culmination of various historical and social influences.

Third, from the above case, it can be seen that the practice of empowerment follows the following transmission chain: the self-empowerment of key persons promotes the empowerment of RACs (RMOs), the empowerment of RACs promotes local community empowerment, and community empowerment promotes the empowerment of individual residents (all residents). The realization of empowerment in each dimension often needs to go through an integration stage to provide participants with opportunities for participation, and then in the subsequent participation stage, cooperate to gather strength, strengthen the capabilities of organizations and community, while continuously realizing individual self-growth through the process of participation. It also became clear that throughout this entire process, the interaction between the government and rural area itself is important, with both sides working together to facilitate rural empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a detailed analysis of the empowerment process in rural areas through an examination of endogenous development practices in the Ota area of Kitsuki City. The findings reveal that empowerment develops gradually across four dimensions: key persons, organization, community, and individual residents (all local residents).

Notably, there is a chain-like process where the self-empowerment of key persons promotes the empowerment of Regional Management Organizations (RMOs), the empowerment of RMOs promotes community empowerment, and community empowerment leads to the empowerment of all local residents. It was also confirmed that two important stages of integration and participation appear repeatedly in this process.

The research emphasizes the importance of interaction between government and rural areas in endogenous development. While based on residents' self-help efforts, it demonstrates that appropriate administrative support is essential for sustainable rural development. The Ota area case illustrates how combining top-down policy support with bottom-up community-led initiatives can lead to effective community building. In particular, the study reveals that administrative financial support enables the realization of resident-led revitalization plans. This finding could serve as a model for endogenous development in other rural areas.

However, it is necessary to consider the unique socio-economic background and cultural traditions of each rural area. Future research should focus on examining the empowerment process in diverse rural contexts and exploring the balance between administrative support and resident autonomy.

This study contributes to understanding the practical implementation of endogenous development in rural Japan through analyzing the four-dimensional empowerment process, ranging from key persons to individual

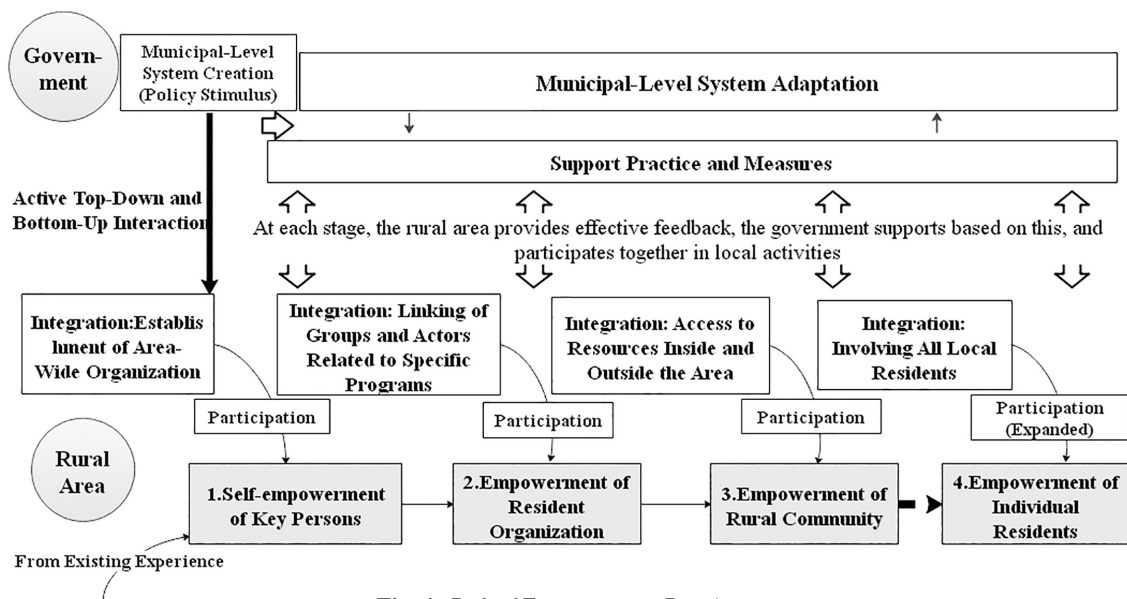


Fig. 4. Path of Empowerment Practice.

residents. It provides practical insights for policymakers and community leaders involved in formulating and implementing rural revitalization strategies. By emphasizing the significance of multi-dimensional empowerment and the synergistic effect between local initiatives and administrative support, this research offers insights into more effective and sustainable approaches to rural development.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Shengcong CAI conceived the original idea for this research. All authors participated in the field investigation in the study area. Shengcong CAI conducted the case analysis. All authors were involved in discussions throughout the research process and in reviewing and editing the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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