

Community Activity Centre Initiative in Yusuhara Town, Kochi Prefecture

Yusuhara Town, Kochi Prefecture



Background

As Yusuhara Town faces increasing difficulty in maintaining community functions due to depopulation caused by declining birth rates and an ageing population, we feel that discussions held through the Community Activity Centre Initiative have made it possible to identify community challenges and develop a sense of urgency among residents. This has changed our frame of mind from a sense of resignation to one of renewed motivation to revitalise our town. Under the key themes of ‘connection’ and ‘self-reliance’, community members and municipal staff got together to envision our town’s future and launched our initiative with the motto, ‘Let’s start with what we can do to achieve it’.

Objectives

The Community Activity Centre system was proposed by Kochi Prefecture in FY2012. This community-driven system uses former primary school buildings, community centres, and other facilities as bases to comprehensively address diverse local issues and needs in areas such as daily life support, welfare, industry, and disaster prevention, while also working with people from outside the community. At the national level, this system is equivalent to a ‘Region Management Organization’ as defined by the Cabinet Office, or a ‘Small Local Hub’ as defined by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. Amid the ageing population and ongoing depopulation, Japan’s rural and mountainous areas

are facing various challenges, including shortages of people to sustain community activities, difficulties in everyday life (e.g. shopping, transportation), and shortages of workers in the agriculture, forestry, and fishery industries. Meanwhile, many local residents are resolved to remain in their beloved communities since they feel a strong sense of attachment and pride. To help fulfill these aspirations, as well as to tackle the challenges facing local communities, Kochi Prefecture is promoting a system for maintaining community functions centred on the Community Activity Centres.

Project Outline

Building on existing community ties and initiatives, the Community Activity Centres are established on a district basis to address the challenges in their respective localities.

[Community Activity Centre Matsubara]

To protect the livelihoods of local residents by ensuring a reliable energy supply, we established and began operating Matsubara Co., Ltd., a company funded by local residents, to take over a petrol station that was going out of business. We also constructed Ai no Sato, a facility for processing and selling local food products, including agricultural produce, processed goods, and sundries. This helps residents generate income from local food products. In addition, we began manufacturing *doburoku*, or unrefined rice alcohol, contributing to the development of local speciality products.

[Community Activity Centre Hatsuse]

This district has the smallest population in Yusuvara Town, with the community at risk of disappearing. To restore energy and vitality to the area, we leveraged our ongoing cultural exchanges with South Korea and created a restaurant equipped with a *jjimjilbang*, a Korean-style sauna, with the concept of ‘a relaxing hideaway known only by those in the know’. Additionally, we developed Takatori Kimchi, a product crafted with authentic Korean flavours. Along with the restaurant’s meal offerings, the centre has become a hub for local economic activity.

[Community Activity Centre Shimagawa]

The closure of the local petrol station raised concerns about difficulty in securing fuel and other essential supplies. To protect the livelihoods of local residents, we established Shimagawa Co., Ltd. through locally-provided funding and created an integrated fuel supply facility that features a new petrol station, a local speciality shop, a tourist information office, and solar power generation equipment to ensure energy supply in times of disaster. As a home improvement store distributor, the facility sells daily necessities and engages in a wide variety of other activities as well, including a meal delivery service, rice cultivation on unused farmland, and the processing and sale of pheasant meat.

[Community Activity Centre Ochimen]

Due to a decline in the younger population, the district was facing a shortage of people to maintain traditional culture and agricultural land. To restore the flow of people, money, and goods to revitalise the community, we converted a former school building into an accommodation facility and began hosting student training camps, thereby creating opportunities for youth interaction. The facility supports the community in various other ways, such as establishing a system to generate income from local ingredients through use of a kitchen facility by a local speciality processing group, as well as forming a community-based farming organisation.

[Community Activity Centre Yusuvara-nishi]

The serious impact of crop damage caused by wildlife had caused farmers to lose motivation and led to an increase in unused farmland. To address this issue, we created a framework for promoting a circular flow of people, money, and goods through controlling harmful wildlife and developing game meat products. We introduced the ‘Gibier Car’, Japan’s first ever mobile meat processing vehicle, which offers local speciality products made with quality game meat.

[Community Activity Centre Yusuvara-higashi]

In the central area, which is experiencing challenges in maintaining mutual support functions with the declining population and hollowing out of its community, we established this facility at a former nursery school to serve as a hub where locals can gather and participate in welfare, daily living support, and various other community-based activities.

Features and Innovations

The pre-merger villages have been preserved as ‘districts’, and each district, under the leadership of its ‘district head’, carries out resident-led self-governance activities that leverage its unique culture and characteristics. Building on long-standing community ties and initiatives, the Community Activity Centres have been established on the basis of these districts. By coordinating with the districts’ respective self-governance organisations, local residents can actively take the lead in promoting initiatives and solutions tailored to local issues.

Results of the Project

o Creation of employment

Approximately 45 new full-time and part-time jobs have been created to run projects at the Community Activity Centres. Those involved in the initiative have gained a sense of fulfillment and confidence through interacting with visitors, which makes their lives more enjoyable as well.

o Effective utilisation of local resources

Residents can spread the appeal of their local

resources to those outside the community through developing products that utilise traditional local specialities. This enables them to preserve traditional cultural resources while stimulating the economy and developing greater confidence in the community.

o Enhancement of local support networks

Members of the community regularly visit and check in on elderly residents through meal delivery services and other outreach activities, which enables residents to maintain mental and physical health and lead an active life with peace of mind.

Issues, Problems, and Responses

Most of those involved in or employed by the Community Activity Centres, including the district heads, are beyond retirement age. To ensure that local traditions are passed down to the next generation, we aim to utilise the community support staff programme to recruit individuals as future leaders rather than just employees.

Future Developments (Expected Effects, Project Vision, and Issues)

While maintaining our ongoing initiatives, we will explore new initiatives aimed at addressing local issues that arise from shifting social conditions while consulting with local residents.

Websites for Reference

<https://www.chisou.go.jp/sousei/sbout/chiisanakyo ten/index.html>

(Cabinet Office: Regional Revitalisation ‘Formation of Small Local Hubs and Region Management Organizations’

<https://www.eitoko.jp>

(Kochi Prefecture: Community Activity Centre Portal Site ‘Eitoko Kochi’)

<https://www.zck.or.jp/site/forum/32927.html>

(National Association of Towns & Villages: Town and Village Initiatives ‘Community Activity Centre

Initiative in Yusuhara Town, Kochi Prefecture’)

Contact

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Photo of *Jjimjilbang* Restaurant Takatori



Residents participating in a ‘health gathering’



Processed goods made with Yusuhara boar meat