Creative Revitalization in Rural Japan: Lessons from Ishinomaki

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Abstract

Different disasters throughout history have prompted Japan to develop diverse approaches to recovery, revitalization, and local resilience. The current global COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. In this paper, we argue the need to study the impacts of COVID-19 on outside major cities such as Tokyo as such areas were already experiencing socioeconomic decline. Ishinomaki in Miyagi Prefecture is a city that has also been undergoing extensive post-disaster reconstruction after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE), notably through various bottom-up approaches, often initiated by volunteers and migrants bringing new, creative ideas to community revitalization. These efforts continue to shape the social life of its residents during COVID-19, making Ishinomaki an important case study in both disaster reconstruction and rural revitalization. This paper examines examples in which creativity played a key role in revitalization, recovery, and community resilience in Ishinomaki over the last decade to shed light on current creative revitalization initiatives at the grassroots level, initiated and carried out by citizens. Drawing on an ethnographic approach conducted remotely in the form of semi-structured interviews, the paper presents the personal narratives of a diverse range of residents and social networks committed to rebuilding the soft infrastructure that is often overlooked compared to hard infrastructure. The paper proposes suggestions for the future based on lessons learned from the past decade, and hopes to illuminate how Japan's rural areas are adapting to a new normal in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: sustainable development, creativity, rural revitalization, Ishinomaki, Japan

Kreativna oživitev na japonskem podeželju: lekcije iz Ishinomakija

Izvilleček

Skozi zgodovino so razne katastrofe Japonsko spodbujale k razvijanju raznolikih pristopov k okrepanju, oživitvi in vzpodbujanju lokalne vzdržljivosti. Trenutno trajajoča globalna pandemija COVID-19 pri tem ni izjema. V tem članku zagovarjamo nujnost raziskovanja

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vpliva bolezni COVID-19 na področja izven velikih mest, kot je Tokio, saj so ta področja družbenoekonomskega nazadovanja doživljala še pred omenjeno pandemijo. Mesto Ishinomaki v prefekturi Miyagi je mesto, ki je bilo prav tako deležno obsežnih postkatastrofalnih rekonstrukcij, ki so sledile velikemu vzhodnojaponskemu potresu (Great East Japan Earthquake, GEJE) iz leta 2011, predvsem prek raznih pristopov »od spodaj navzgor«, ki so jih pogosto izvajali na pobudo prostovoljcev in migrantov, ki so prinašali nove, ustvarjalne ideje za ponovno ožvitev podeželja. Ta prizadevanja družbeno življenje njegovih prebivalcev oblikujejo tudi v času pandemije COVID-19, zaradi česar je mesto Ishinomaki pomemben primer proučevanja tako rekunstrukcije po naravnih nesrečah kakor oživitve podeželja. Ta članek nadalje preiskuje primere, v katerih je pri ponovni oživitvi, okrevanju ter vzpostavljanju skupnostne odpornosti ključno vlogo igrala kreativnost, pri čemer bo naš namen osvetliti predvsem trenutne pobude kreativne oživitve na osnovni ravni, ki jih dajejo in izvajajo navadni državljani. Izhajajoč iz etnografskega pristopa, ki ga izvaja s pomočjo oddaljenega pristopa v obliki polstrukturiranih intervjujev, želi pričujoči članek predstaviti osebne pripovedi raznolikih prebivalcev in družabnih omrežij, ki se posvečajo obnovi mehke infrastrukture, ki jo za razliko z grobo infrastrukturo pogosto spregledamo. Na podlagi lekcij, ki smo se jih naučili v preteklem desetletju, članek prav tako ponuja predloge za prihodnost ter si prizadeva osvetliti, kako se japonska podeželjska območja v odzivu na pandemijo COVID-19 prilagajajo na novo normalnost.

Ključne besede: trajnostni razvoj, kreativnost, ožvitev podeželja, Ishinomaki, Japonska

Introduction

Japan's rural regions have been shrinking for several decades, leading to diverse revitalization efforts with varying levels of success. According to provisional calculations by the think tank Japan Policy Council in 2014, the over-concentration of major cities like Tokyo will cause many of the more peripheral municipalities to disappear (Government of Japan 2019). This article focuses on the example of Ishinomaki and its recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake (hereafter referred to as the GEJE) as a case study on rural revitalization. In addition to the effects of shrinkage and aging experienced by other rural and regional areas in Japan, the case of Ishinomaki was accelerated due to the disaster. The official reconstruction process by top-down methods focused on the physical rebuilding, or "hardware", of public buildings and infrastructure without enough consideration of pressing social issues (Dimmer 2016). In short, the government failed to provide the necessary social and welfare services to disaster victims, leading to NPOs and social enterprises taking up the role to revitalize the community (The Japan Research Institute 2016). Ten years on we should continue to study the situation in Ishinomaki in order to continue improving revitalization efforts and the lives of

citizens. We aim to show that even though Ishinomaki is, like other rural areas in Japan, suffering from the effects of a shrinking economy, declining birth rate, and rapidly aging population, times of crisis can be seen as an opportunity for more creative revitalization strategies. Rather than adopting pro-growth strategies a more “adaptation-oriented” approach is gaining favour where regrowth seems unfeasible (Matanle and Sato 2010; Chang 2018). The paper aims to contribute to current research on rural revitalization and creative placemaking through the presentation of narratives featuring key actors who are actively adapting to an era of shrinkage by focusing on community wellbeing, entrepreneurship and activating site-specific assets (Chang 2018). The case of Ishinomaki will be useful to learn from for other rural areas in Japan as well as shrinking regions worldwide with regard to how to respond and adapt to a post-growth era by taking up the opportunities that depopulation offers.

Figure 1. Location map of Ishinomaki City. (Source: Author's drawing)

Ishinomaki City (figure 1) has the second-largest population in the northern prefecture of Miyagi, with approximately 142,000 people. During the 2011 GEJE Ishinomaki suffered the highest number of casualties and was one of the most severely damaged municipalities. Although Ishinomaki is mostly known as a post-disaster town, the region was already facing problems before the GEJE. Like many other rural areas in Japan, young people were relocating to larger urban areas to find work or better sources of income, and the city struggled to attract new

migrants. Interviewees described Ishinomaki as “quiet and boring” and “not very attractive” when asked what their impression of the town was. According to the population census conducted every five years, Ishinomaki’s population hovered between 1700,000 and 180,000 after the war, reaching a peak around 1985. The city’s population began to decrease for the first time in 1990, and has since been declining consistently ever since with a projected population of 77,000 by 2060 (Ishinomaki City s.d.). The city lost about 3,600 lives due to the GEJE, with many more moving away shortly after, hastening the existing depopulation trend. All 26 affected towns have continued to lose residents through migration, while the population of Sendai, the prefectural capital, has been increasing yearly since 2011, with an average growth rate of approximately 0.6% (table 1).

Table 1: Populations of Ishinomaki and Sendai.

Source: Population Census of Japan—Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

Why Ishinomaki?

Although the GEJE did enable a new start and encouraged innovation and experimentation at a higher level and faster pace compared to other, unaffected areas, current revitalization efforts have not managed to reverse population decline. It can be argued that Ishinomaki could not reach the necessary level of resilience to sustain its population. However, we argue that the case of Ishinomaki is still valuable to study and should not be overlooked and judged simply

by population trends. The whole population of Japan is decreasing, and most communities will continue to shrink. If some do not then it simply means that other regions will shrink even more to compensate, as competition for migrants becomes fiercer. As Matanle (2010, 4) points out, “the idea of returning to growth, if that is what revitalization means, is now an unattainable objective for nearly all of Japan’s regional areas.” Therefore, instead of focusing on growth, what’s more important is accepting depopulation and focusing on increasing the quality of life for current residents with the aim of developing a more stable, sustainable, and inclusive community (Sorensen 2008; Mitsuhiro 2017). Matanle (2018) further contends that there are some potential benefits of shrinkage, in what he terms a “depopulation dividend” referring to positive outcomes such as less impact on the environment and more sustainable forms of living.

Immediately after the 2011 GEJE Ishinomaki attracted many volunteers and revitalization efforts, as well as scholars examining the various new initiatives and projects launched as a direct response to the disaster (figure 2). However, as one of our interviewees noted, a decade on such efforts have decreased in recent years, and now with the COVID-19 pandemic the city has gotten quieter compared to before (Interview 8). The ten-year anniversary of the GEJE in March 2021 offers a timely reflection and opportunity to look ahead to the future. While many volunteers have left, others continue to return with some even making the move and migrating to Ishinomaki full time. In a study of newcomers in Ishinomaki, Klien (2016) refers to them as examples of Florida’s “creative class” who are instrumental in offering innovative revitalization ideas and producing new creative networks comprised of both local and non-local members. During the time of Klien’s research many initiatives were still in the incubation period (*ibid.*). New rebuilding initiatives in communities take time to establish, and this is an ongoing and evolving process. This paper continues to study those who are engaged in different community activities and forms of entrepreneurship in order to provide updated insights into placemaking practices in Ishinomaki. We look at the roles their efforts play in the recovery process and how diverse narratives are influencing the definition of a “common goal” for Ishinomaki and vice versa.

Figure 2. Visitors inside Ishinomaki Community & Info Center. (Source: Copyright Ishinomaki Community & Info Center)

Contribution to the Field

Both the current literature and government material have written extensively about the physical reconstruction progress at Ishinomaki, such as Ubaura, Niihama, and Miyakawa (2016), who studied the urban spatial transformation after the GEJE. While some scholars have analysed post-disaster recovery processes from a social perspective, most have focused on the immediate phase after disasters and the description of best practice of disaster relief (Chan, Man, and Lam 2019; Goldfine 2011; Rotolo and Berg 2011). Others have described the situation of survivors and their lived experience by studying the everyday lives of residents after the Kobe Earthquake in 1995 and the Chuetsu Earthquake in 2004 (Miyamoto and Atsumi 2008; Tatsuki 2007; Varghese 2010). A few have continued to study individuals who have stayed and how they make a living, move away, return or, in the case of new migrants, relocate to a place many have chosen to leave years later after the disaster itself (Hawkins and Maurer 2010). Shaw and Goda's (2004) study highlighted the important role of civil society in the form of voluntary organizations and NPOs to address social issues that were still prominent nine years after the Kobe earthquake. Similarly, Aldrich (2012) stressed that high levels of social capital—defined as the networks and resources attainable through people's connections to others—are crucial in building resilience in the

long run, and more effective compared to the short-term benefits of economic aid and physical infrastructure. Storr and Haeffele-Balch (2012) found that community-based organizations play a key role in connecting heterogeneous and loosely connected communities that lack high levels of social capital. The rise of local NPOs and non-local actors who have moved to Ishinomaki (both temporary and permanent) or commute regularly, and/or have set up their own business or social enterprise projects, have been crucial in bringing new ideas and energy to Ishinomaki that deserve to be studied, along with the victims who suffered directly from the disaster.

In addition, as Dimmer (2016) noted the GEJE triggered strong positive advancements in place- and space-forming disciplines, leading to an “unprecedented collaboration of so many different creative domains”. Mano and Noda (2020) describe the importance of studying *machizukuri* (bottom-up citizen participation in community building) not only through spatial transformations, but also the various programs that take place and the people that operate them. Similarly Posio (2019) highlighted how both the process and product of *machizukuri* are instrumental in the rebuilding of soft infrastructure, as this involves local participation from residents as active stakeholders in community building. Who are the architects, artists, designers, social entrepreneurs, and other creatives who are active in Ishinomaki, and how do they collaborate through different networks, and ultimately contribute to the rebuilding of Ishinomaki in both tangible and intangible ways? Now with the COVID-19 pandemic, how are they getting on and adapting to a new normal? This paper contributes to the current literature by providing individual narratives of a range of actors involved in collaborations that are not only contributing to the physical but also the soft infrastructure of Ishinomaki that many feel is still lacking. Thus the contributions of this paper are as follows: 1) to present diverse individual voices of those living and actively contributing to revitalization in Ishinomaki, 2) expand on methods of digital ethnography and virtual fieldwork, 3) contribute to a better understanding of how Ishinomaki is still evolving (not just shrinking) by adopting new approaches to placemaking, describing who they are supported by, and how can they succeed in the long term to better inform future policies.

The paper will first outline the research methodology and explain how remote ethnography was adopted as the main method to collect data during the pandemic. The second section introduces social revitalization and recovery in the context of rural Japan and then focuses on Ishinomaki as a case study. The last part discusses the personal individual narratives drawn from in-depth interviews and what we can learn from them in understanding current attitudes and developments of rural revitalization and placemaking in contemporary post-growth Japan.

Research Methodology—A Narrative Approach

Narratives can highlight the need for actions to address social problems and critical conditions local communities are facing. Narratives also tell us more about the specific person concerned, which in turn provides insight into the wider community and the challenges it faces as a whole. Narratives turn a story into knowledge for the recipient, as the informant decides and orders the relevant issues, introduces them through storytelling and relates the details into the context. As such, narrative data provides active, multi-perspective/multi-vocal and accessible data on sensitive matters, especially when we try to grasp the dialectic nature of topics such as rural revitalization in Japan.

Interpretation of Narratives

To interpret the individual narratives, in this research we applied the “interpretation schema”, established by Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2011) as a methodological tool to analyse what guides community (old and new) members’ decision to revitalize their community. This analytical lens has been chosen as Chamlee-Wright and Storr (2011) argued in their work that social capital in the form of collective narratives can play an important role for community to recovery after disasters. As such, the individual and collective narratives offer insights into the life stories, collective schemes and community composition which different members use to evaluate the (new) crisis situation and determine which recovery approach to take. We recognized the “interpretation schema” as the missing link between individual stories and collective narratives which could help explain not only how and why individual revitalization efforts take place, but also how these efforts contribute to diverse collective narratives and “common goals” to rebuild Ishinomaki.

Ethnography and Fieldwork during a Pandemic

This study is part of a larger research project that examines rural revitalization in contemporary Japan with a focus on socially engaged and bottom-up approaches, especially those initiated by rural migrants who are contributing to the “(re) making of a new rural” (Ji 2021). Prior to the pandemic, the authors conducted multi-sited physical fieldwork on different revitalization projects, including Ishinomaki. The study transitioned to online fieldwork from April 2020 when a state of emergency was declared in Tokyo on April 7, 2020, lasting until May

25, 2020. Another state of emergency for the Tokyo metropolitan area was announced on January 7, 2021, and was expanded to eleven prefectures. The data for this paper draws on online ethnographic fieldwork conducted between April 2020 and March 2021 through a series of semi-structured interviews via Zoom with individuals who either live in Ishinomaki or have participated in revitalization projects there. Additional online data was obtained from various websites and social media platforms including Instagram and Facebook. Such types of “digital ethnography” (Pink et al. 2016) and “digital anthropology” (Miller 2018) have become the new normal in ethnographic research in the digital age. In a previous paper, the authors examined similar themes of social capital, innovation, and local resilience in a traditional Tokyo neighbourhood during the COVID-19 pandemic (Imai and Ji 2021), with a focus on creative individuals and small businesses. The present study is a continuation of this research on social revitalization during the pandemic, looking to the rural context in contrast to the urban.

Social Revitalization and Recovery in Rural Japan

Rural revitalization in Japan refers to the need to address difficulties faced by rural regions, including a rapidly decreasing and aging population, lack of progress, and socioeconomic decline. In response, the Japanese government has implemented several policies and measures since the early 1970s, including town mergers to decentralize and save on administrative costs (Rausch 2006). In parallel with government initiatives, there has been an increase in local bottom-up efforts of “self-revitalization” initiated by migrants, activists, artists, and academics (Dilley, Shinzato, and Ando 2017; Love 2013). Dilley, Shinzato, and Ando (2017) have noted the diverse names given to contemporary revitalization movements, including regional revitalization (*chiikiokoshi*), regional placemaking (*chiikizukuri*), and village making (*murazukuri*). In this paper, we propose the term “creative revitalization”, drawing on theories of creative placemaking (Courage and McKeown 2019) and the self-revitalization approach of *machi-zukuri* (Sorensen and Funck 2009; Satoh 2020). The present paper aims to illuminate examples of the bottom-up creativity that is transforming Ishinomaki from a post-industrial/post-growth, post-disaster city into a creative city that has maintained a group of active entrepreneurs, designers, and creatives ten years on after the GEJE, which we argue has been a key factor in maintaining Ishinomaki’s vitality and culture which ultimately increases the attractiveness and liveability of the city as a whole.

Machizukuri and Creative Placemaking

Many authors (Dimmer 2016; Evans 2002; Satoh 2020; Sorensen and Funck 2009) cite the importance of emerging *machizukuri* practices in Japan for inclusive community development. *Machizukuri* (literally translated as “town making”) is characterized by citizen participation as a progressive planning approach. It is often contrasted with traditional urban planning, *toshikeikaku*, which refers to top-down government-initiated approaches. According to Satoh (2020) the word *machizukuri* is not easily translated to English as it contains various concepts and meanings. It can be roughly understood by key words such as “community design”, “community development”, “community building” and “placemaking” amongst others (Satoh 2020, 3). *Machizukuri* practices developed in Japan from the 1960s on, and are an example of “bottom-up creative approaches based on collective action and use of local resources” that includes the improvement of both the physical and social environment as well as their collective management (ibid., 254). The term is broad and has come to be used widely as a general category, but at its core emphasizes citizen participation and the engagement of common people and residents. Ishinomaki experienced high levels of *machizukuri* activities immediately after the GEJE due to an influx of new volunteers and migrants. However purely bottom-up community development was seen to have reached a “deadlock” around the third year of reconstruction, with advocates arguing that *machizukuri* is not enough as a standalone method (Murakami and Wood 2014). Satoh (2020) calls for more integrated planning approaches to *machizukuri*, which include urban planning and policies that support *machizukuri* rather than relying purely on bottom-up community development.

Creative placemaking is an emerging practice that is still evolving with diverse approaches (Courage and McKeown 2019). In their 2010 White Paper for the National Endowment for the Arts, Markusen and Gadwa describe creative placemaking as follows:

In creative placemaking, partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities. Creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired. (Markusen and Gadwa 2010, 3)

In their book *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice*, Courage and McKeown (2019, 202) go on to define creative placemaking as “creative practices

within the process of placemaking”. Creative placemaking offers opportunities for citizens to engage and co-create with an emphasis on collaborative and participatory approaches, similar to the *machizukuri* approach introduced earlier. Therefore, we believe there is overlap between the two concepts and that the *machizukuri* movement in Japan can be enhanced by incorporating different creative placemaking initiatives.

The community was already aware of the need to find creative approaches to revitalize Ishinomaki before the GEJE (Ishiguro et al. 2015; Sato 2017), and this was intensified after the disaster. Creative initiatives include contemporary art festivals, restructuring of existing industries, especially fisheries, and new agriculture ventures such as growing olives (Kato and Miyake 2018; Mano and Noda 2020; Tagore-Erwin 2018). Dimmer (2016) noted that the GEJE was in fact a catalyst for existing developments that were accelerated and infused with new ideas, new money and new people who turned their attention to the disaster struck regions. When the global pandemic hit alternative initiatives were already underway, as illuminated by our interviewees. The resilience and attitude of people in Ishinomaki to COVID-19 reminded one individual of the time of the disaster, “this is the same Ishinomaki that has overcome all kinds of difficulties since the GEJE, now with the added complexities of the pandemic we are responding in the same way as we did ten years ago” (Interview 7). The next section focuses on Ishinomaki as a case study for post-disaster reconstruction by briefly summarizing recovery efforts to date, before presenting individual narratives.

Great East Japan Earthquake 2011

The Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE), measuring a magnitude of 9.0, was the biggest earthquake to occur in post-war Japan, along the east coast of the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011. The earthquake caused a tsunami that destroyed the seawalls, resulting in over 28,000 casualties and the destruction of over 120,000 buildings nationwide. Ishinomaki was one of the worst affected cities, being the closest to the epicentre of the earthquake. After the 2011 disaster, damaged areas received around 280,000 volunteers from Japan and abroad, including many who later migrated to live and work in Ishinomaki. New facilities have opened in the last few years, such as the Ishinomaki Genki Ichiba Food Market in June 2017, and a major new community cultural centre called the Maruhon MakiArt Terrace, designed by the well-known Japanese architect Sou Fujimoto, opened in early 2021.¹ To provide some context of revitalization in Ishinomaki we briefly

1 The MakiArt Terrace -Ishinomaki City Complex Cultural Facility includes a concert hall, exhibition and meeting rooms, museum and cafes. For more information see website <https://makiart.jp/>.

sketch out the different phases below: 1) Ishinomaki before 2011, 2) recovery efforts immediately after 2011, 3) from recovery to revitalization up to 2020, and 4) responses to COVID-19 and the 10-year anniversary of the GEJE.

Phase 1: Ishinomaki before 2011

Ishinomaki's main industries are fishing and shipbuilding, with an emerging tourism industry. The fishing industry prospered after the Meiji Restoration but started declining in the 1970s, while the city centre went into decline from the late 1990s (Mano and Noda 2020). Labour-intensive industries had long been declining, leading to rising unemployment and out-migration. For more than 50 years before the GEJE, the former and current Ishinomaki city had already been experiencing depopulation, as seen in many other areas in Japan (Matanle 2011). Ishinomaki adopted similar strategies as other regional towns and aimed to attract migrants by cutting taxes and offering new incentives for young people and families to move to the area (Pongponrat 2017).

Phase 2: Recovery Efforts Immediately after 2011

According to the government's Reconstruction Agency, over 470,000 people were evacuated from their homes and the government's focus was on building new housing as fast as possible.² This was also the period where a large number of volunteers came and started to set up new groups and initiatives, including the well-known volunteer team "ISHINOMAKI 2.0"³ made up of a group of urbanites, mostly from Tokyo. The influx of new people after the GEJE resulted in the rise of creative businesses and initiatives, leading to a diversification of industries beyond the reliance on fishing and farming. Along with other groups the movement of citizen-led *machizukuri* processes started in Ishinomaki through small-scale "micro-initiatives" such as the renovation of vacant and damaged properties (Mano and Noda 2020).

Phase 3: From Recovery to Revitalization up to 2020

Current reports state that 99% of private (18,000) and public housing (30,000) projects have been completed in Ishinomaki as of August 2020, and approximately

2 See <https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/english/>.

3 See <https://ishinomaki2.com/> for overview of projects and activities.

154,000 buildings were rebuilt by individuals who received support grants to rebuild themselves.⁴ The term “creative reconstruction” was used by the government with the hope that Ishinomaki’s restoration would be an exemplar case for Japan’s future, but the results fell short with many residents unhappy with restoration policies and delays in rebuilding (*The Mainichi* 2021). Nevertheless creative revitalization efforts have continued, including the new biennale Reborn Art Festival that first ran in 2017, consisting of contemporary art, music, and food events. While it aims at regional revitalization and promotion of disaster-stricken areas, it is also a vehicle to showcase the current recovery progress of the area (Itoh and Konno 2019).

Phase 4: 2021 and Beyond: Responses to COVID-19 and the 10-Year Anniversary of the GEJE

According to the Reconstruction Agency, as of early 2021 most of the infrastructure in the areas affected by the earthquake had been completed. Due to the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, many events had to be cancelled but some were able to transition online while others rethought ways to engage with the public in a pandemic safe environment, such as starting livestreams of music performances and concerts with limited in-person attendance. Crowdfunding platforms were used to disseminate information on new projects and raise funds with the help of existing social networks and the general public. Three of our interviewees have launched new projects utilizing crowdfunding platforms, which include the reuse of existing properties into DIY workshops and studio spaces for artist and creators, and a multi-purpose complex housing a theatre, music venue, eateries, shops and workshop space. As one of our interviewees said,

The pandemic coincided with the 10-year anniversary of the GEJE which made people realize they cannot keep going the way things are. Both the pandemic and anniversary prompted a re-evaluation for what kind of new direction we want to head towards. (Interview 7)

Next, we introduce narratives drawn from original data from interviews to illuminate examples of some of the new revitalization directions in Ishinomaki.

⁴ See “Progress to Date” for further information: <http://reconstruction.go.jp/english/index.html>.

Introduction of Narratives and Placemaking Projects

One of the biggest positives after such a devastating event has been the influx of new people, many of whom were former volunteers who migrated to Ishinomaki and became involved in grassroots recovery processes in the form of creative social enterprises engaged in various community design projects (Dimmer 2016; Klien 2016). While the government has released details on the reconstruction progress, not much news has been reported on the communities themselves and how they have attempted to rebuild their social lives (Matthews 2020). While sceptical toward government, locals have appreciated the help of individual groups and volunteers, albeit some are still cautious, and newcomers need to take the time needed to gain trust (Klien 2016). We interviewed a total of 12 individuals and present six as representative narratives. Interviewees consisted of both long-term residents and returning/new migrants working in local NPOs, social enterprises, and small businesses (table 2). The interviews lasted between one to two hours, were recorded with permission, and later partly transcribed and translated. The interview questions revolved around three key sections: 1) their personal background, 2) their involvement in post-disaster reconstruction, and 3) the impacts of COVID-19 and their response to it.

Out of the 12 individuals six are I-turners (migrants who were originally from outside Ishinomaki and migrated), 4 are U-turners (originally from Ishinomaki and returned after the GEJE), and two live outside of Ishinomaki but continue to be involved in projects and visit regularly. We have used pseudonyms for all interviewee names.

Table 2: Interviewees

	Business Type	Location
1	Social enterprise – Sustainable fashion	Onagawa
2	Social enterprise – Recycled jewellery	Ishinomaki
3	Entrepreneur – Guesthouse and outdoor sports	Ishinomaki
4	Commercial business – Furniture and design company	Ishinomaki
5	Independent small business – Side dishes and sweets	Ishinomaki
6	NPO – Reuse of vacant property	Ishinomaki
7	NPO – Reviving art and culture	Ishinomaki
8	NPO – Migrant support	Ishinomaki
9	Incorporated company – Community design	Ishinomaki
10	Museum director	Ishinomaki
11	Designer and architect	Yokohama
12	Architect	Kobe

Narrative 1: “Outsider” Starting a Social Enterprise from Scratch in Ishinomaki

Sally started a social enterprise in 2012 that trains local women in making a range of jewellery products. Her business currently employs 16 staff, including 13 local staff in Ishinomaki. Originally from America, Sally moved to Ishinomaki after the GEJE from another part of Japan to volunteer and contribute to community rebuilding. Sally’s business did not receive any financial support from the government but managed to support itself with sales of the products to create a sustainable business model without relying on external funding. Sally says there are years when the business does well and surplus profit is donated to other groups in need. As a foreigner and migrant to Ishinomaki Sally is aware of her unique position, “I value collaboration and input from the team but because I am in a position of power (as the founder) I recognize there is an inequality. I try to be aware of it as much as I can. I am also a foreigner and did not experience the disaster like some of the workers.” When asked what the biggest challenge in running a social business was Sally said, “the biggest challenge is balancing the social part, the community, and being a business that needs to make money. We are a social enterprise, but I didn’t know if I could pay the women at the start as I didn’t know if people would buy our products, but at least we could create community by gathering to work together.” Sally’s business pays staff by the hour and has a flexible working policy which allows workers, many of whom are mothers, to balance their work and life.

During COVID-19 Sally’s business received subsidies from the government to cover the loss of income due to requests from the government to shut down for a few weeks during the state of emergency. When they could work, staff hours were staggered to increase social distancing as it was hard to work from home, due to the tools required to make the products. Sally also noted how staff appreciated being able to come to work as staying at home was sometimes more stressful. Sales decreased for a few months and were affected by shipping restrictions, but overall the business was able to stay afloat. Sally credits the help of government grants but noted they were not always easy to apply for: “I am pleased with what the government offered but we had to research and apply for the grants ourselves, which was hard to navigate. I knew other small businesses that didn’t know how to apply, and our staff helped some others to apply through the right channels.” Sally is an example of a social entrepreneur who focuses on a small scale business to provide a livelihood to residents in a time when jobs are scarce, especially for those who are more vulnerable, such as women and mothers. In addition to providing a paid job the supportive work environment contributes to the social revitalization of the community.

Narrative 2: U-turn Environmental Entrepreneur

Originally from Ishinomaki, Akira enjoyed playing in nature such as going fishing and canoeing as a child. His parents' house was damaged during the GEJE, and he wanted to help his hometown while trying to reconnect with nature. In 2019 he started a guesthouse and offered marine activities such as SUP and canoeing. The guesthouse has a homelike feeling with the common space resembling a large living room, and it is often used as a community space. Akira describes himself as an environmentalist and wants to connect more with the community, "natural disasters occur in various places around the world and there is a limit to what I can do, so I am doing what I can such as providing a place for people to make friends and gather at the guesthouse, which has a shared kitchen." He noted that many people move to Sendai and other big cities, as Ishinomaki is considered a rural area. As work is limited in Ishinomaki, he started his own business: "I am trying to work on my own and find a reason to remain in Ishinomaki, as I am invested in staying for a long time and settling here." Most of his customers at the guesthouse are young people in their 20s and 30s, especially students. Akira spends time with them and often participates in social activities such as shared meals, water sports, and beach clean ups, which are regularly featured on the guesthouse's active Instagram account.

During COVID-19, the number of tourists decreased by up to 80%. In response, Akira has transitioned to long-term stays of about one to three weeks similar to a shared house model. As the guesthouse is aimed at visitors, Akira is trying to think of how to engage more with local people. His outdoor water activities have been popular among young locals who could not travel during COVID-19, but discovered they can do fun activities in Ishinomaki. Akira also hosts students for an internship program where they come and stay and work at the guest house. In 2020 the internship transitioned online. Akira worked with students to develop a new concept for the guesthouse, which eventually became the "studycation", concept based on the idea of a workcation proposed by the students themselves. As classes are conducted remotely, the program is aimed at inviting students to stay at the guesthouse and enjoy nature and outdoor activities in their free time with others, rather than studying alone by themselves. The program has been successful, with more students recruited in the 2021 season. Akira is an example of a motivated entrepreneur who has successfully started his own business by combining his passion for the environment with giving back to the community and acting as a bridge to connect young people to learn more about Ishinomaki.

Narrative 3: Urban–Rural Migrant Supporting Other Creative Migrants

Originally from a town near Tokyo, Kaori was one of the 280,000 volunteers in Ishinomaki that arrived shortly after the GEJE. At the time she was already looking for a job in Tokyo but gave that up to be more involved in Ishinomaki, where she regularly commuted back and forth before making the decision to move permanently. During the volunteer period she noticed there was a shortage of rental properties, especially places where volunteers and potential migrants could stay short to long term. She decided to work on filling the gap in the market and founded a company that purchases and renovates vacant houses to create affordable housing for young people and new migrants, “In Japan the old houses have no asset value, but that’s the sort of properties we want to work on to create new value, not only by renovating but by creating social value by attracting creative people to live and work together.” The company has renovated over thirty old houses to date, and operates eleven shared houses. Other than renovating properties, Kaori’s company also works to connect people in the community through activities such as the coordination of student internships and training for migrants who wish to start their own businesses.

In response to COVID-19, Kaori’s company has launched a new project that was crowdfunded online with the help of over 150 people, raising a total of nearly 1,800,000 yen. A vacant warehouse was transformed into a community space and live/workspace for artists impacted by COVID-19. Current residents include a performing artist who lost commissions in Tokyo and moved to live in the shared house and studio when it opened in June 2020. Others include a student who lost their part-time job, and another art student who had to postpone plans to study abroad. The system provides free rent for up to three years with basic living materials and goods donated through the community in the form of a gift bank, where residents can recycle homeware and other daily goods. Similarly the artists also give back in various non-monetary ways using their skills and labour, such as holding public events and workshops for the community. In this way the organizers hope to emphasize the need for non-monetary forms of giving based on mutual support and concepts such as paying it forward, which they believe should be the future in the post-growth, post-pandemic era. The group also has partnerships with galleries in Tokyo in prominent locations, including Harajuku, where creators can exhibit their work and maintain a connection to urban areas. Kaori still notes the importance of face-to-face connections and other offline activities during the pandemic, and is trying to hold as many in-person events as possible on a small scale, such as markets and art performances. Kaori is an example of a young, active migrant who has committed to staying and working in Ishinomaki after the GEJE, working to create new value by utilizing existing resources.

Narrative 4: Creating a Place for the Arts and Culture during Pandemic

Riku was originally from Ishinomaki and went to Tokyo where he attended a prestigious university before starting work. After the GEJE he felt drawn to return to his hometown and contribute in some way. Arts, culture and entertainment venues were declining in Ishinomaki, and most of the few that remained were damaged by the GEJE. As government efforts were mainly focused on rebuilding housing, cultural spaces were neglected, leading Riku to focus his energy on providing a place people could meet and exchange ideas: “I noticed there were not many places people can gather and enjoy art or attend live music events. I wanted to revive the cultural scene in Ishinomaki, which I had enjoyed in Tokyo, to make Ishinomaki an interesting and attractive place.” In the next few years Riku involved himself in various activities including founding an organization that holds music, theatre and art events, acting as chairman for a local theatre committee, and migrant support. He says, “I see myself as a planner and organizer that makes things happen. People think Ishinomaki is boring, but I want to create a movement where we activate places to enable local people and visitors to experience interesting events in all kinds of artistic and cultural fields, such as theatre, music, dance, photography and so on.”

Figure 3. Drive in Theatre using newly constructed sea wall. © Rino Kawasaki.

Riku has been active during the pandemic, working on several new projects including devising a new way for the public to enjoy theatre events in a safe way. Rather than adopting online methods, one of the innovative ways Riku proposed

was to adopt reconfigure a small room to create a stage for one viewer to watch one volunteer performer through a small hole to create a virus-safe viewing experience. Riku also notes other innovative events held in Ishinomaki, such as a drive-in theatre where viewers watched a movie projected onto a 10m high sea wall and listened to the audio through their car radios: “The people were actually against the building of the new sea wall and there were negative feelings around it. However, after the movie event where the sea wall was used in a positive way there was some change in perception, and even some acceptance, which is very powerful” (see figure 3).

Figure 4. A vacant property that will be transformed into a new multi-purpose complex including a venue for music and theatre, along with clothing stores. ©Ryuta Yaguchi.

In addition, Riku recently started a new group with three other members that aims to revive theatrical arts in Ishinomaki. The group’s first major project involves transforming a vacant property (figure 4) into a place for theatre with other add-on programs for all member of the community: “I want to create a place where people of all ages can come and gather. Not everyone wants to watch movies, which is why we will also have clothing shops, eateries and other programs where people can come and then have chance encounters” (figure 5). He describes his vision as being similar to the hip neighbourhood of Shimokitazawa in Tokyo known for its diverse blend of cultures and programs, such as second-hand clothing shops and music venues. The new complex is scheduled to be completed next spring in 2022, mostly through DIY methods to involve the local community. The project is a continuation of the original DIY projects such as IRORI Ishinomaki,

which was one of the first multi-use spaces remodelled from a vacant property and now houses an open co-working space, café and general meeting space. Riku is an example of an active member of the community who is devoting his time and energy into multiple *machizukuri* projects often collaborating with others and adopting digital platforms such as SNS, Youtube and crowdfunding sites to promote Ishinomaki and its charm.

Figure 5. Conceptual drawing of proposed programs in the new transformed property.
© Ryuta Yaguchi.

Narrative 5: New Migrant Starting a Small Business

Maki is an I-turner in her 30s from a prefecture near Tokyo who is in the process of setting up her new business in Ishinomaki. She worked as an office lady in Tokyo before losing her job due to the poor economic situation her company faced after the GEJE. Shortly afterward, she found a new job in 2011 working for a disaster relief organization and came to Ishinomaki to help clear up vacant houses. During that time, she had a dream of opening her own coffee shop. She moved back to Ishinomaki in 2017 and started to work at a local café, where she gained valuable contacts before opening her own store in May 2020, at the height

of the pandemic. She now runs a take-out shop selling *sōzai* (side dishes) and *manjū* (buns). When asked why she chose Ishinomaki, Maki cited the supportive and tight-knit community:

There are many people who started their own business here or are in the same situation as myself. Depending on the season, people also share a variety of vegetables with each other. The physical size of the town is big, as you need a car to get around Ishinomaki, which can be inconvenient, but the people are close. Cities like Tokyo are too big; even Sendai is too big for me.

To open her shop, Maki participated in a business training program held by Ka-ori's company, at the recommendation of her boss at the café where she worked. Along with six other hopeful entrepreneurs, the program they completed was not so much about teaching management skills or other textbook methods on how to start a business. Rather, it prompted them to understand themselves better by asking themselves why they wanted to start the business and why they chose Ishinomaki, helping them to clarify their own business goals and set up a successful business plan.

As a young migrant in the community, Maki does not know many local people her age where she lives and works, and mostly interacts with other migrants of the same age group. Maki seemed very motivated and positive, with a clear idea of what she wants even though things were not always easy. As her business is new, she is not eligible for government support, and thus took out a loan and used her own savings. She operates the shop six days a week and does not have much time to rest. She does not employ anyone and does all the food preparation, selling, and social media. Eventually she hopes to grow her business to the point where she can hire one other person but no more than that:

I want to keep a close relationship with customers. If I expand too much and become too busy, I may not have this deep connection. I am so busy now working more than 12 hours a day, and I think this kind of lifestyle will continue for a while. Even though it is tiring, there are times I really enjoy it. I do wish I had more time to myself sometimes, but right now this lifestyle is just right for me.

Maki is an example of an individual struggling to make a livelihood in Ishinomaki without relying on governmental support, but who is supported by her social networks.

Narrative 6: Long-term Resident Staying to Support Ishinomaki

John is a long-term resident in Ishinomaki. Originally from the UK, he came to Japan to work as an English teacher. John identifies as a survivor of the earthquake: "I am definitely a survivor, I could have been killed when the tsunami struck, I was just lucky to be in a safe place at the time." Turning down the opportunity to return to the UK straight after the earthquake, John felt compelled to stay and contribute to rebuilding efforts because of his friends. He remarked that these ties have deepened because of his choice to stay: "I don't think Ishinomaki was a particularly attractive city, but I had a lot of good friends here which was the reason I wanted to stay, and my friendships have strengthened as people appreciated my choice to stay with them and face the rebuilding together." John noticed a difference between how people responded to the disaster: some are very positive and want to rebuild, as in the case of many migrants, while others are still suffering trauma and get emotional visiting certain sights. He thinks the government's reconstruction is "a little ironic", as "the more rebuilding there is to make the city look better the harder it is to tell that a tsunami had been here", effectively erasing the memory of the disaster apart from a few signs here and there. John thinks it is important to keep the memory alive and not just make Ishinomaki look like another generic city, which is unfortunately turning out to be the case.

Being one of the few of the interviewees who was already living in Ishinomaki prior to the GEJE, John says: "The city was already losing its population prior to the earthquake, which magnified the problem of depopulation and out migration. The centre of the city is pretty dead, there was no supermarket until one opened recently, and lots of shops have shut." Though there are some new migrants in recent years, many had left after volunteering in the reconstruction, John feels the volunteers can be tribal: "There are many different people and different groups operating in Ishinomaki, but I do not feel there is much collaboration. Some groups, for example, are aimed at the younger generation, and I do not personally attend many of their events but will collaborate if asked." John cites the 2005 merger of the city as challenging in terms of social cohesion and efficient decision making, "Even after the merger [of the areas to form the new city], I along with other older residents still refer to each town individually, and this is perhaps why it is hard to reach a consensus, which slows down decision-making compared to smaller neighbouring towns like Onagawa." John spends his time these days as the director of an information centre dedicated to the GEJE and provides both Japanese and English explanations to visitors and students. It is one of the only places where one can obtain information in English about the GEJE. There are plans for a new permanent facility soon, but John thinks that rather than focusing on building large high-tech facilities, the personal connection of having someone

to talk to visitors is most important for conveying memories of the event. John is an example of a long-term resident who has seen new people coming in and adopt different approaches, but is happy to focus on his own efforts to educate visitors about the GEJE rather than creating something new. He places importance on the personal encounters and direct interactions with people that he engages in to connect with them in a meaningful way.

Discussion of Narratives

The 2011 disaster was a catalyst for many volunteers to come and assist in the reconstruction work and motivated some to stay and live in Ishinomaki (I-turn), while attracting some who had previously left to return (U-turn). Many people lost everything in the disaster, which led to a growing awareness of the unsustainability of a capitalist society but also an increase in awareness and changes in attitudes in people who want to focus on other kinds of wealth, to find purpose in doing something more meaningful and rewarding. In the example of Kaori's project, she emphasized how the free rent model was open to include anyone who creates something, including those working in the arts, crafts, design, music and so on. Another emphasis of the project is on non-monetary contributions, as Kaori stated, "it's not about the money, it's about support", where supporters can donate unwanted items or contribute their time to participate in DIY renovation and building maintenance workshops. Riku's project also hopes to engage the local community in workshops to involve them in the renovation process to feel a sense of ownership as well as a chance to interact with the wider community. Such models not focused on growth but on sharing, reusing and personal relations are highlighted as common goals for the future.

Towards a More Self-Sufficient and Inclusive Community

As such, most narratives presented in this paper generally want to see the rebuilding of a better soft or "social infrastructure". More than one interviewee said that the physical "hard infrastructure" is more than enough, even to the point of being unnecessary. Some are worried that ongoing management costs may be too high with the continued depopulation. What is important now is to focus on how to create a livelihood to improve the quality of life of those that do choose to stay and live in Ishinomaki. Most of the interviewees have started their own business or social enterprise and hope to continue to sustain themselves in a freelance capacity. The advantage of sustainable business models that do not need to rely solely on

government grants, subsidies or external donations became clear as an over-reliance on the latter can be unsustainable in the long run. This emphasizes the need for self-sufficiency and the ability for projects to generate enough income to support themselves.

Many of the interviewees pointed to the importance of creating a “community”, especially one that is more inclusive as well as diverse. As one U-turn migrant said,

Japanese communities especially small rural ones can be “closed” and not accepting to outsiders. Before the GEJE we had a sense of pride and weren’t really open to outsiders. After the GEJE when everything was broken, we became more open to new ideas and migrants who helped contribute to rebuilding. (Interview 1)

One of the interviewees also noted the need to move beyond words such as “reconstruction” and “disaster area” and instead to convey the local charm of Ishinomaki and its people. One artist said the challenge is to break away from the identity of Ishinomaki as a disaster town and allow citizens to freely express other themes. In a recent exhibition for young artists the curator chose not to “curate” and instead allow anyone who was willing to participate, in order to be more inclusive and give them the freedom to pursue non-disaster themes in their work.

Diverse Networks with a Common Goal

While it may seem like there are different groups and individuals working on their own projects, as John mentioned, Akira and Maki talked about a “supportive community” and believe there is a collective sense of community and common goal. Similarly, people like Riku also wish to make Ishinomaki an attractive place to live for people of all ages, both long-term residents and migrants, by providing specific places for certain activities where people can meet and interact. As Akira said:

There are many entrepreneurs in Ishinomaki but due to the relatively small size of the town we all know each other, especially the new groups that have formed directly after the disaster where everyone started at the same time. Although our specialties and methods are different, I think we all the same goal which is to better the region.

He further added that there is an atmosphere that makes it easy to start something new because there is an existing community, which is crucial when facing challenges such as COVID-19: “When the pandemic hit we all shared information with each

other and shared where to apply for subsidies and how to get help.” Many interviewees were quick to respond and utilize online platforms, including social media, crowdfunding, and livestreaming to continue to facilitate exchanges between residents and visitors (such as with the warehouse-turned-artist studio project).

Conclusion

In this paper we have set out to understand recovery efforts in Ishinomaki as told through personal accounts to offer insight into the micro-level processes of revitalization. Drawing on in-depth interviews in the form of individual narratives allowed us to understand them from a wider perspective to comprehend shared visions as well as differences and struggles. We see that creative revitalization comes in various forms of entrepreneurship and placemaking strategies, which do not only involve the rehabilitation of physical spaces but also social revitalization through the systems, programs and activities that take place. The case of Ishinomaki is not that different to other rural areas in Japan which have adopted community-led approaches, but the case of Ishinomaki demonstrates concentrated and diverse forms of creative revitalization which are valuable references for other areas. Future studies should not only focus on the quantitative or economic measurement of success or failure, but also on the analysis of the quality of revitalization efforts and how they can be analysed against non-growth oriented measures. We emphasize the importance of studying revitalization through the lens of individuals in the community at a personal level, as their collective response gives an insight into the specific benefits and challenges of various approaches. This is an important consideration as small communities often do not benefit from policies focusing on economic recovery in the long run, and only by continued study of the lived experiences of residents involved can the real success stories of social revitalization be understood. In addition, the current COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the relevance of understanding the interplay of all forms of recovery (economic, political, and social) and the need for innovative policies and stimuli measurements tailored to support local communities.

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