

How to invite immigrants to rural areas in Japan? : The decrease in population and the significance of immigration policy

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Rural areas often experience de-population because of population aging and emigration of younger individuals to urban areas. As such, the population in rural areas of Japan is declining rapidly, and the shortage of manpower in workplaces (agriculture, manufacturing industry, hospital, welfare facilities, etc.) is supplied by technical trainees from Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and so on. However, the system of technical trainees will be revised in 2024, and after the change, it is expected that the trainees will be able to change their workplace more freely. The influence of this change is critical for rural areas in Japan because immigrants/foreign workers often prefer urban areas/cities to rural areas. Rural areas in Japan must compete against other countries in inviting immigrants. For example, Canada has established an immigration policy for inviting immigrants to rural areas (e.g., Provincial Nominee Program and Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot; Koji 2023; Silvius & Boddy, 2023). However, Japan does not have such an immigration policy. Therefore, each local government and host society in rural Japan must promote self-reliance for inviting immigrants/foreign workers, and the system of technical trainees is the only way to invite and retain them in rural areas (Tokuda et.al. 2023).

This research aims to identify 1) ways to invite and retain immigrants/foreign workers in Japanese rural areas, and 2) the challenges involved in inviting them and their adaptation to the host society. My co-researchers and I have carried out field-work in the rural areas of West Japan (including the prefecture of Ehime, Okayama, Shimane, Hyogo, and Kyoto), where we interviewed members of local governments, international centers (“Kokusai kouryu Kyokai”), volunteer groups/non-profit organizations, business offices, religious groups (catholic churches, mosques), and ethnic communities (Koreans, Filipinos, Vietnamese; Tokuda et al. 2016, 2019, 2023).

We found that the number of foreigners in Japanese rural areas increased rapidly in the 2010s. However, each sector had their own problems of accepting immigrants/foreign workers owing to 1) the lack of manpower, budget, and system of acceptations and support for immigrants, 2) widening areas of municipalities because of “Heisei-no-Daigappei” (merger of municipalities) in 2005 and the widely dispersed population of immigrants/foreign workers in rural areas, and 3) the unawareness of the locals regarding the increase in foreign residents in host societies.

Tokuda et.al (2023) suggest that both resources of activity (“Katudou-Shigen”) and resources of

immigration policy (“Seisaku-Shigen) should be reinforced. Regarding resources of activity, it is necessary to strengthen administrative institutions’ support to immigrants, increase the manpower and budget or subsidy for international centers and volunteer groups, and enlighten the residents in host societies about the importance of extending support to immigrants (language education, employment opportunities, and support for women, children, and young adults with roots in foreign countries). Regarding resources of immigration policy, the national government should establish “the immigration law” as soon as possible because the tasks for supporting activities in local governments are not legalized (excluding the system of immigration control, technical trainees, language education, etc.) and their political and economic bases are weak. Some Japanese local governments have established a multi-cultural coexistence plan (“Tabunkakyousei Suishin plan”). While this plan is a type of resources of immigration policy, few local governments in rural areas have such a plan. Local governments and host societies in rural areas should consider how many and what kind of immigrants/foreign workers are necessary, and create a policy or plan for inviting them to their region/community. These efforts by host societies are indispensable for implementing the immigrant policy to invite immigrants/foreign workers to rural areas.

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