

COPING WITH DEPOPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC AGEING IN RURAL JAPAN: FROM GOVERNMENT TO LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Coping with Depopulation and Demographic Ageing in Rural Japan: From Government to Local Governance

Recently, the Japanese government initiated an administrative process that has resulted in the merging of municipalities across the country. Since then, the quality of services provided to inhabitants by the local government has declined in depopulated areas. As a result, it has been suggested that there may be a role for self-organization in the revival of local governance. Despite having a rapidly ageing population, Kawane village has been particularly successful in revitalizing local governance through reorganization of the local community. This research examines a variety of the community activities involved and the unique management methods behind them in an attempt to ascertain the factors that have resulted in successful self-governance in this village.

Key words

depopulated mountainous village, local community, Kawane Promoting Association, local governance, Kawane Village, Japan

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1. Introduction

Recently, the Japanese government initiated an administrative process that has resulted in the merging of municipalities across the country. Since then, the quality of services provided to residents by the local government has declined, especially in depopulated areas¹. Prior to the merging, a small-sized rural municipality was apt to allow its residents to receive prompt public services, even though it was financially inefficient from an administrative perspective. Those benefits were a result of face-to-face relationships between municipal officers and residents, which allowed municipal officers to be easily acquainted with the residents' public service needs². In other words, the residents could access the public services with low costs, and the local government had to endure paying high costs³. Since the administrative agglomeration, however, residents have now had to pay high costs to access public services, since the up-scaled local municipalities are responsible to an increased number of residents, with a lower available budget.

These high costs for residents are exacerbated by restricted involvement of municipal officers in community activities. Prior to the administrative agglomeration, municipal officers tended to act not only as members of the administrative system, but also as community members⁴. However, after the administrative agglomeration, it became less likely that a municipal officer would be present in the community activities due to an increased amount of responsibility.

As a result, it has been suggested that there may be a role for self-organization in the revival of local governance. In many depopulated areas, the distance between local government and the local community has continued to grow, and this has led to the newly established local government transferring certain responsibilities, for example the maintenance of cultural heritage, to the local community⁵.

However, due to severe depopulation over the last 50 years, most local communities have lost their capabilities to self-organize, while local governments have replaced many of the local communities' roles in rural societies with increased subsidies from the central government⁶. Furthermore, most depopulated local communities with

¹ For more information, see: (1) KAJITA Shin, "Development of Local Allocation Tax-Cut Policies for Municipalities with Small Populations and Its Interpretation: Focusing on Relation with Municipal Merger Policies", *Geographical Review of Japan*, 81-2, 2008, pp. 60-75. (2) CHEON EunGyoung, SAITO Yukihiko and ARA Hiroko, "Change of Public Facilities from the viewpoint of Convenience for Residents in the Consolidated Municipality: A Case Study of Akiruno City, Tokyo Metropolis", *Journal of the Rural Life Society of Japan*, 24-1, 2005, pp. 8-14. (3) HATAKEYAMA Teruo, "Effects on Elderly Welfare Service of the Merger of Municipalities with Geographic Barriers: Case Study in Numata, Gunma Prefecture", *Geographical Review of Japan*, 80-13, 2007, pp. 857-871.

² For more information, see: KIM Doo-Chul, "Can Local Government Substitute for Rural Community?: An Alternative Framework for Rural Development in the Context of East Asia", *Geographical Review of Japan*, 72(B)-2, 1999, pp. 100-110.

³ For more information, see: KIM Doo-Chul, "Enhancing self-organizing capabilities of rural communities", in A.M. Bicalho and S.W. Hoeffle (eds.), *The Regional Dimension and Contemporary Challenges to Rural Sustainability*, Laget-UFRJ/CSRS-IGU, 2004, pp. 347-351.

⁴ For more information, see: KIM Doo-Chul, *Revitalization and Self-organization in Depopulation Areas: Comparison of Japan and Korea*, Kokon Shoin; Tokyo, 2003.

⁵ For more information, see: SAKUNO Hirokazu, "The Problem and Expectations of Regional Development in Hilly-Mountainous Regions and Correspondence of Rural Settlements", *Annals of the Japan Association of Economic Geographers*, 52-4, 2006, pp. 283-296.

⁶ For more information, see: KIM, Doo-Chul, "Regional Process of Dependency and Changes of Endogenous Self-organizations in a Depopulated Remote Area: A Case Study of Namiai Village, Nagano Prefecture, Japan", *The Human Geography (Jinbun-Chiri)* 52-1, 2000, pp. 28-50.

rapidly ageing populations are no longer able to take charge of the transferred responsibilities from the newly established local government, despite those responsibilities having traditionally been taken over by local communities. Consequently, the reorganization of the local community has become indispensable, which has become evident to most of the newly established local governments in Japan, but little progress has been achieved as of yet.

In this paper, a successful case of revitalization through the reorganization of a local community will be presented, which took place more than 30 years before the current problem began. In order to clarify the reorganization process, the authors examine a variety of community activities involved and the unique management system behind them in an attempt to ascertain the factors that have resulted in successful self-governance of the area presented in the case study.

2. Outline of the Study Area

Kawane Village, which consists of 19 hamlets, is located in the mountainous area of Akitakata City, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan (Fig. 1). Located 3 hours by car from Hiroshima City near the border with Shimane Prefecture, the village has experienced significant consolidation with surrounding municipalities, which has resulted in an increased distance from the newly established location of the local government offices. In the case of Kawane Village, the situation has become even more difficult, given that it was already in a remote location, far from the former local government office and difficult to access.

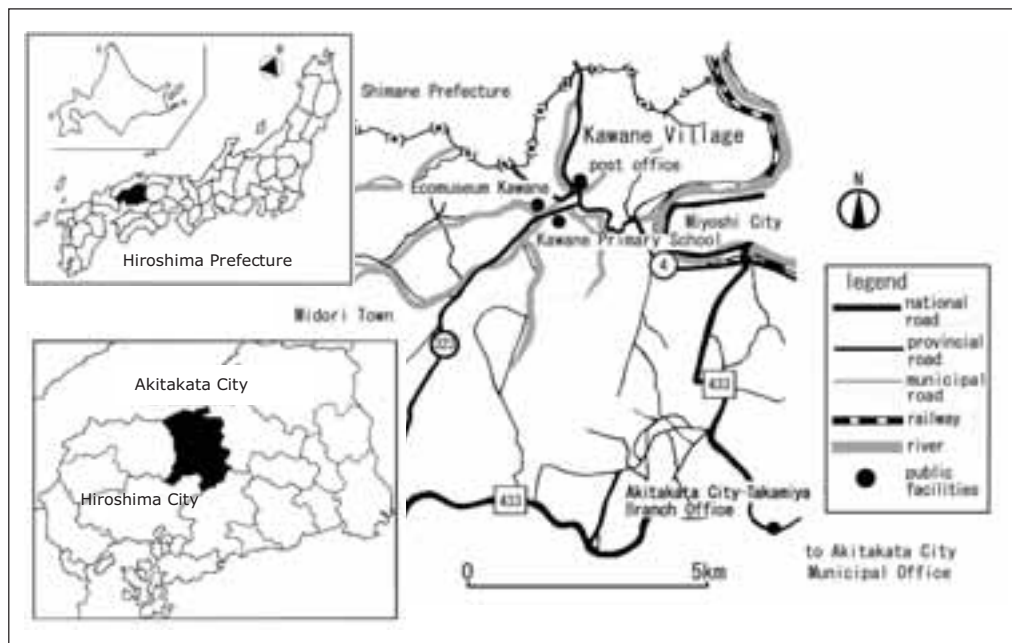


Fig. 1: Study area.

Before 1953, Kawane Village was a municipality with its own village office with financial autonomy. However, in 1953, Kawane Village merged with two other small

municipalities and became Takamiya Town. Eventually, Takamiya Town was merged again in 2006, becoming part of Akitakata City. As a result of this merge, the residents of Kawane Village now have to pay higher costs to access public services from the newly established local government.

According to the 2005 Census, the total population of Kawane Village is 632 people, with 266 total households. Of these, the number of farming households is 153. The ratio of the population over 65 years old was 47 percent as of 2005, which is more than double the national average (Fig. 2). Despite having a rapidly ageing population, this village has been particularly successful in revitalizing local governance through reorganization of the local community, which started more than 30 years ago.

In the process of revitalizing local governance, it must be noted that the Kawane Promoting Association has played a crucial role in confronting the regional problems such as depopulation and aging. It is worth analyzing the leading role this organization has taken in a variety of community activities. Of special note is the unique management system behind this role.

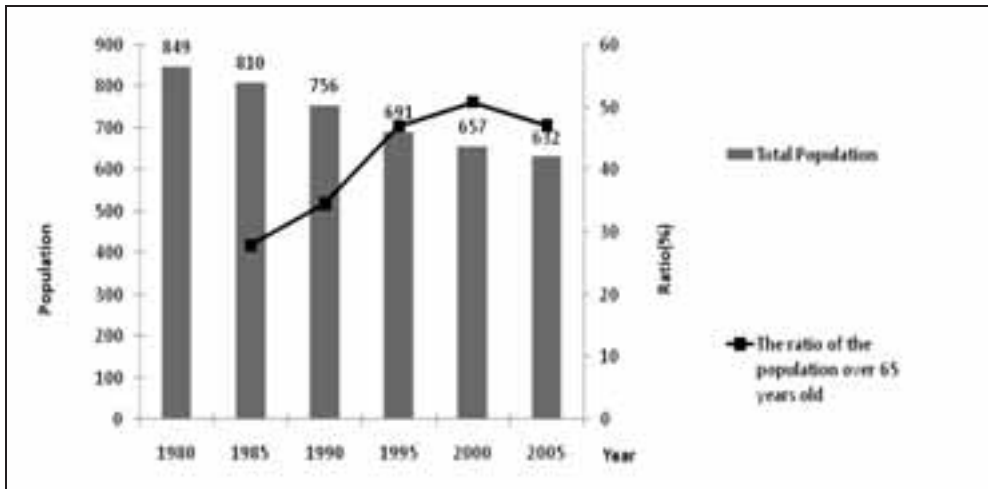


Fig. 2: Changes in population and aging rates in Kawane Village.

Source: Census and field survey.

3. The Role of the Kawane Promoting Association

Since its establishment in 1972, the Kawane Promoting Association has experienced three crucial turning points. In the summer of 1972, Kawane Village experienced a severe flood, which was made worse by inadequate relief efforts by the local government, resulting in devastation for the community. In general, during this period, the infrastructure was still poor in rural Japan, leading to difficulties in providing prompt assistance when disasters occurred. In the wake of this disaster, the locals realized the disadvantage of their remote location and, soon after, a common “our village on our hands” mindset appeared among the locals within the community. This mindset emphasized the need for greater self-sufficiency, which was required to keep them secure.

Before the flood in 1972, the Kawane Promoting Association consisted of only a few households, meaning that it could not be a representative body for the whole village. Participation in the Kawane Promoting Association increased after the flood in part due to this "our village on our hands" mindset. Eventually, all the households of Kawane Village became members of the Kawane Promoting Association, which then replaced the traditional organization scheme at the level of hamlets. Subsequently, members would give encouragement to the entire region to become involved in the organization of cultural activities.

This cooperation across hamlets allowed the cultural activities, namely unique festivals with strong historic traditions, to be continued. Due to severe depopulation over the previous 20 years, these festivals and traditional activities would have been impossible to continue because of insufficient manpower available at the hamlet level. The largest festival held in Kawane Village every year is the Festival of the Fireflies. Great care is taken throughout the year to ensure that the environment is adequate for the fireflies and large amounts of preparations take place for the over 4,000 visitors that attend the festival each year. Additional events include the making of lanterns with local children that are sold to raise money, and the Memorial Event of Peace. Traditional activities such as *Kagura*⁷ and the transplanting of rice are very important to each hamlet. These activities require increased cooperation within the Kawane Promoting Association. In this way, the Kawane Promoting Association came into the role of being a representative of traditional organization at the hamlet level. It must be noted, however, that the role the Kawane Promoting Association played was limited to mostly cultural activities because of insufficient experience with collective reasoning. However, through the organization of these cultural activities, the residents slowly began to realize their fundamental entity as being Kawane Village rather than their own individual hamlet.

In 1983, it was decided that the Junior High School located in the middle of Kawane Village would be closed by the local government. This school, in addition to being the main source of alumni in the village, as in other rural areas in Japan, also served as an informal center to the village, often utilized by residents. In addition to the loss of a source of education in Kawane Village, the closure would represent a spiritual and mental blow to the residents. As the representation of residents, The Kawane Promoting Association was able to present a plan for the continued use of the Junior High School facilities. This coordination in constructing a plan to preserve the Junior High School facilities was the catalyst that started the association in acting as the actual representative of the local community in relation to the local government. The Junior High School was then renovated by the Kawane Promoting Association for the good of the community as a part of regional revitalization (Fig. 3 and 4). The Ecomuseum Kawane, as it is now known, is used as a center for community activities in addition to being a rest spot for travelers and a restaurant. Residents of Kawane Village have utilized the facilities in ways that benefit the community, making the building the core of community activities. As it is free to use, the capabilities of this facility were greatly modified to adapt to the aging population's ever-changing problems. All this is made possible by the large amount of trust the Kawane Promoting Association has between its members. Although it has no formal power, the inherited legitimacy from the traditional hamlets, in coordination with its ability to work with government, is central to its effectiveness.

⁷ *Kagura* is a Japanese word referring to a specific type of traditional theatrical dance, usually performed in rural areas.



Fig. 3: The entrance of Ecomuseum Kawane. The Japanese words written on the dishes mean "accommodation", "meal" and "training center for community development".

(Photo by the authors, May 2007)



Fig. 4: Ecomuseum Kawane, a former Junior High School.

(Photo by the authors, July 2007)

In the 1980s, after experiencing efforts to preserve the Junior High School, the Kawane Promoting Association began to act as the actual representative for the local community when dealing with the local government. Previously, individual hamlets would have been directly consulted by the local government when dealing

with development projects; however, it became more efficient for the local government to work with the Kawane Promoting Association, rather than with each individual hamlet. When expropriating land for public development from residents, the Kawane Promoting Association would be better able to negotiate between individual landownership and public benefits. For example, the Kawane Promoting Association addresses the maintenance of local roads, a problem many children of elderly Kawane residents consider when visiting their parents. Often rough and potentially unsafe roads need to be paved or widened to better accommodate travelers. The Kawane Promoting Association is able to work with residents on allowing a small portion of their land to be used for the widening of the roads. This is often difficult, as traditionally, Japanese farmers tend to consider arable land more valuable than road.

Consequently, the benefit the local government receives from this arrangement is that it no longer needs to negotiate the distribution of benefits derived from development. Instead, this role can often be taken successfully by the Kawane Promoting Association, which can settle disputes with the residents on their own accepted and understood terms in contrast with the local government, which has to work under general guidelines that are not always acceptable to the residents.

Finally, since the 1990s, the Kawane Promoting Association has begun to manage private land resources and offer welfare services to individuals. Kawane Village faces a serious problem in welfare services provided for the elderly, given that it is located in remote, mountainous area, far from the center of the municipality. To confront the problems faced by the aging population within its community, the Kawane Promoting Association started offering various activities to assist the elderly. The physical wellbeing of the residents is looked after with activities designed to encourage physical exercises to improve overall health (Fig. 5). To assist residents with these exercises, healthcare providers come by the village and offer instruction twice a week. This service utilizes a building constructed by the Kawane Promoting Association for the benefit of the residents. This is of great assistance to those who are unable to travel between their residence and the center of the municipality due to distance or inability to operate a vehicle. Additionally, a delivery lunch service is provided to the elderly living alone in an effort to ensure proper nutrition (Fig. 6). This service also encourages social interaction between elderly residents and the volunteers delivering the lunch.

With regard to managing private land resources, the Kawane Promoting Association has established a sub-organization. This organization is separate from the Kawane Promoting Association in terms of budget and follows special rules in regard to managing private land resources. The abandonment of arable land due to farmers retiring is a large regional problem, especially in smaller communities with larger populations of elderly residents. This service is beneficial in that, when a resident is unable to take care of their arable land, the organization continues its cultivation on behalf of the resident.

4. Self-governance system of the Kawane Promoting Association

The Kawane Promoting Association has instigated the development of eight related departments, each managed by the Kawane Promoting Association, and each responsible for specific tasks or activities (Fig. 7 and Tab. 1). In addition, for certain activities, the Kawane Promoting Association organizes executive committees, as

required, which encourages the participation of various stakeholders in the village. This research shows that the success of the Kawane Promoting Association lies in its unique style of management, whereby there is no central authority; instead, decision-making powers are transferred between units as required, ensuring full participation by local residents.



Fig. 5: Physical exercise healthcare program for the elderly.
(Photo by the authors, July 2007)



Fig. 6: Delivery lunch service to the elderly living alone.
(Photo by the authors, July 2007)

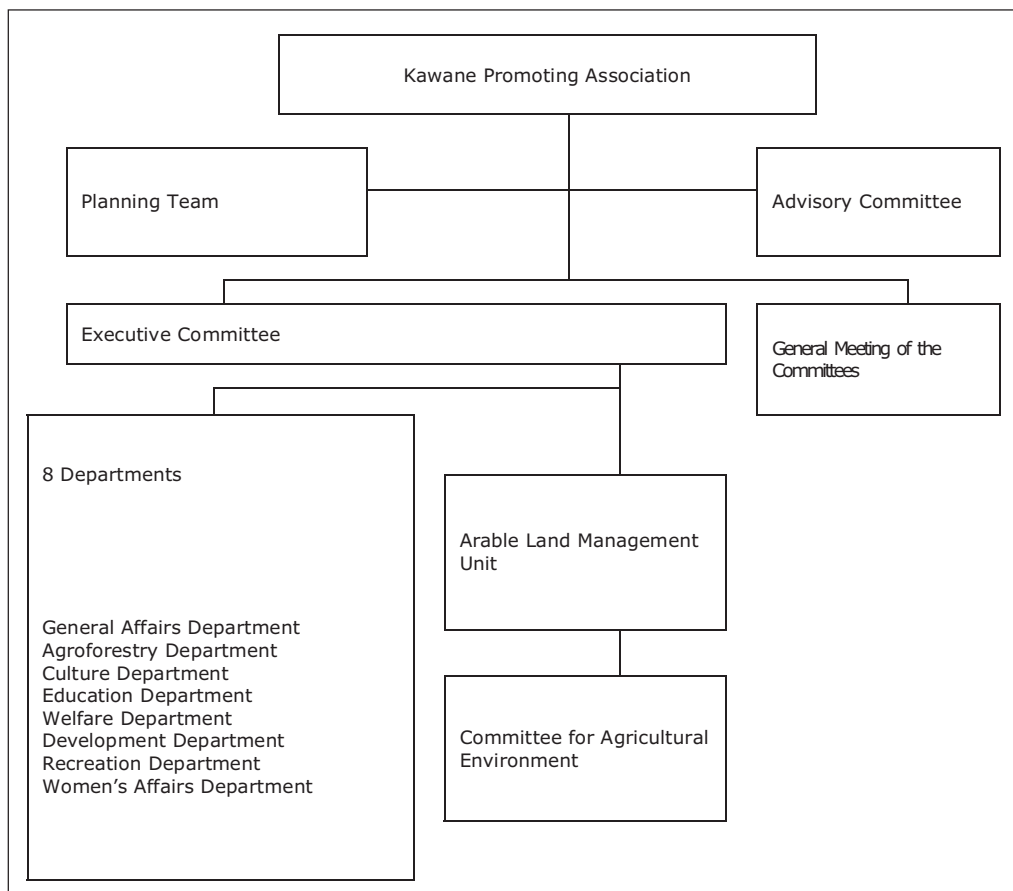


Fig. 7: Organization of the Kawane Promoting Association.

Source: Field survey.

Tab.1: Aims and activities of each department of the Kawane Promoting Association.

Department	Aims and Activities
General Affairs Department	Round-table conferences between the Kawane Promoting Association and the municipal officers, issuing bulletins, coordination among departments.
Agroforestry Department	Developing special products, transplanting rice festival
Culture Department	Maintaining and preserving traditional culture
Education Department	Planning festivals, events for children
Welfare Department	Feast for the elderly, delivery lunch service, physical exercise healthcare program
Development Department	Environmental preservation, Fireflies Festival
Recreation Department	Sports and leisure events, participating in town sports competition
Women's Affairs Department	Preparing for transplanting rice, preparing for festivals.

Source: Field survey.

5. Concluding Remarks

Along with its empowerment, the annual revenue of the Kawane Promoting Association has increased every year (Fig. 8). About 80% of the revenue comes from autonomous sources such as donations from the locals, benefits from activities and membership fees. The amount of subsidies from the local government is less than 20% (Fig. 9). With these increased autonomous revenues, the Kawane Promoting Association has been able to expand its community activities. For decades, the Kawane Promoting Association has been revitalizing the local region. This is the result of the Kawane Promoting Association being organized by the local community, with full participation by local residents. In turn, the situation has greatly improved the abilities of the community to self-govern.

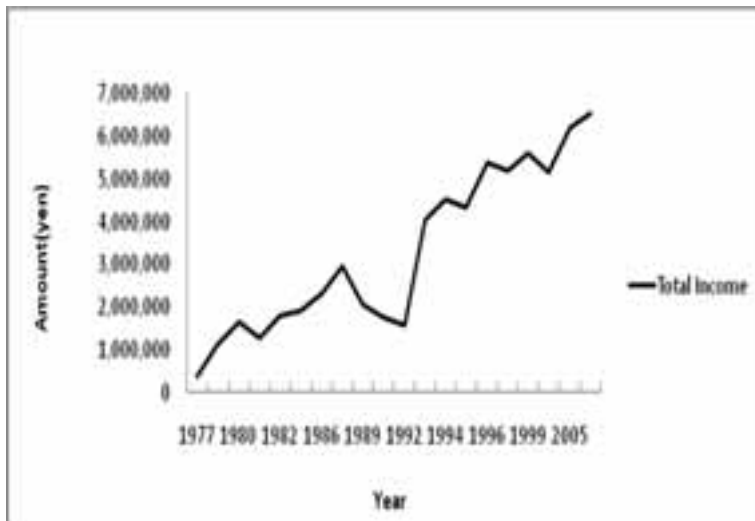


Fig. 8: Annual revenue of the Kawane Promoting Association.
Source: The minutes of the general meeting of committees (1978-2007).

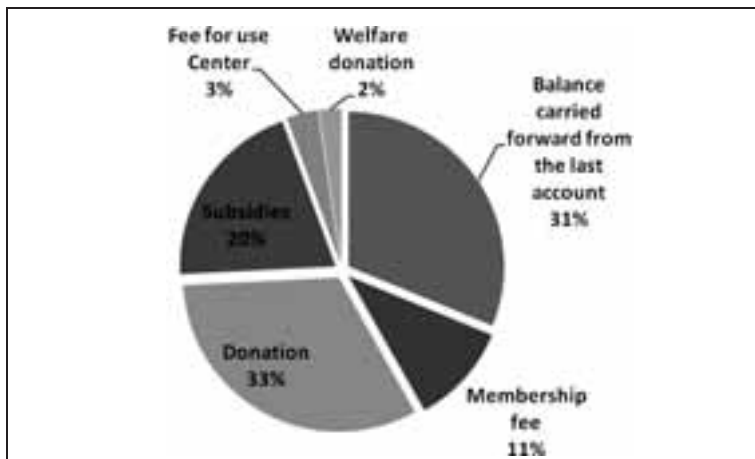


Fig. 9: Revenue sources of the Kawane Promoting Association.
Source: The minutes of the general meeting of committees (1978-2007).

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Summary

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Kawane village is located in the mountainous area of Akitakata City, Hiroshima prefecture, Japan. Despite having a rapidly ageing population, this village has been particularly successful in revitalizing local governance through reorganization of the local community. This research examines a variety of the community activities involved, and the unique management methods behind them, in an attempt to ascertain the factors which have resulted in successful self-governance in this village.

Since its establishment in 1972, the Kawane Promoting Association has experienced three crucial turning points. Initially, the Kawane Promoting Association, which had previously consisted of only a few households, encouraged the entire region to become involved in the organization of cultural activities. Since the 1980s, the Kawane Promoting Association has begun to act as a representative for the local community, for example, in dealing with local problems and in communicating with the local government. Finally, since the 1990s, the Kawane Promoting Association has begun to manage private land resources and offer welfare services to individuals. The Kawane Promoting Association has instigated the development of eight related departments, each managed by the Kawane Promoting Association, and each responsible for specific tasks or activities. In addition, for certain activities the Kawane Promoting Association organizes executive committees, as required, which encourages the participation of various stakeholders in the village. This research shows that the success of the Kawane Promoting Association lies in its unique style of management, whereby there is no central authority; instead, decision-making powers are transferred between units as required, ensuring full participation by local residents.

For decades, the Kawane Promoting Association has been revitalizing the local region. This is the result of the fact that the Kawane Promoting Association is organized by the local community, with full participation by local residents. In turn, the situation has greatly improved the abilities of the community to self-govern.