# Political Economy and Rural Resilience.

# A Case Study on State and Companies from Japan.

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# Declaration

*I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.*

# Abstract

The research aims to investigate how the state and companies can shape the resilience of rural Japan, whereby resilience indicates those efforts to alleviate the exhaustion of regional economies and allow their future reproduction in the context of the post-demographic transition.

It has been accepted that 'rural' theories do not exist, and there have been intense debates on the usefulness of the concept, especially in approaching rural problems. The research leverages on two approaches of the rural, the rural as a locality and the rural as a social representation, to argue that resilience can be understood by looking at the actions and beliefs of those who can shape the rural: the state and companies.

Starting from one policy intervention, the research explores through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 38 companies in rural Japan how the theories proposed by the state to create resilience unfold in two localities and how they intersect with the practice and understandings of rural companies.

The main findings suggest that the theories and measures to create rural resilience advanced by the state, which concern changes in working practices and agricultural reforms, might have little impact on the capacity of local socio-economies to reproduce themselves in the future. Serious limitations also emerge concerning companies' capacity to upgrade the local socio-economic fabric.

The attempted theoretical contribution of the research is to provide a case where the capacities of state and private economic agents in creating rural resilience can be observed simultaneously rather than separately. It tries to offer a more nuanced vision around the interrelationships between the role of states and companies in forging the future of the rural. Empirically, the research shows how Japanese rural companies are adapting to and confronting the challenges that demographic changes create and how in so doing they might build rural resilience.

*To my family and Pi, friends and new sisters, Ogawa Sensei, Hiroshi and Pat*

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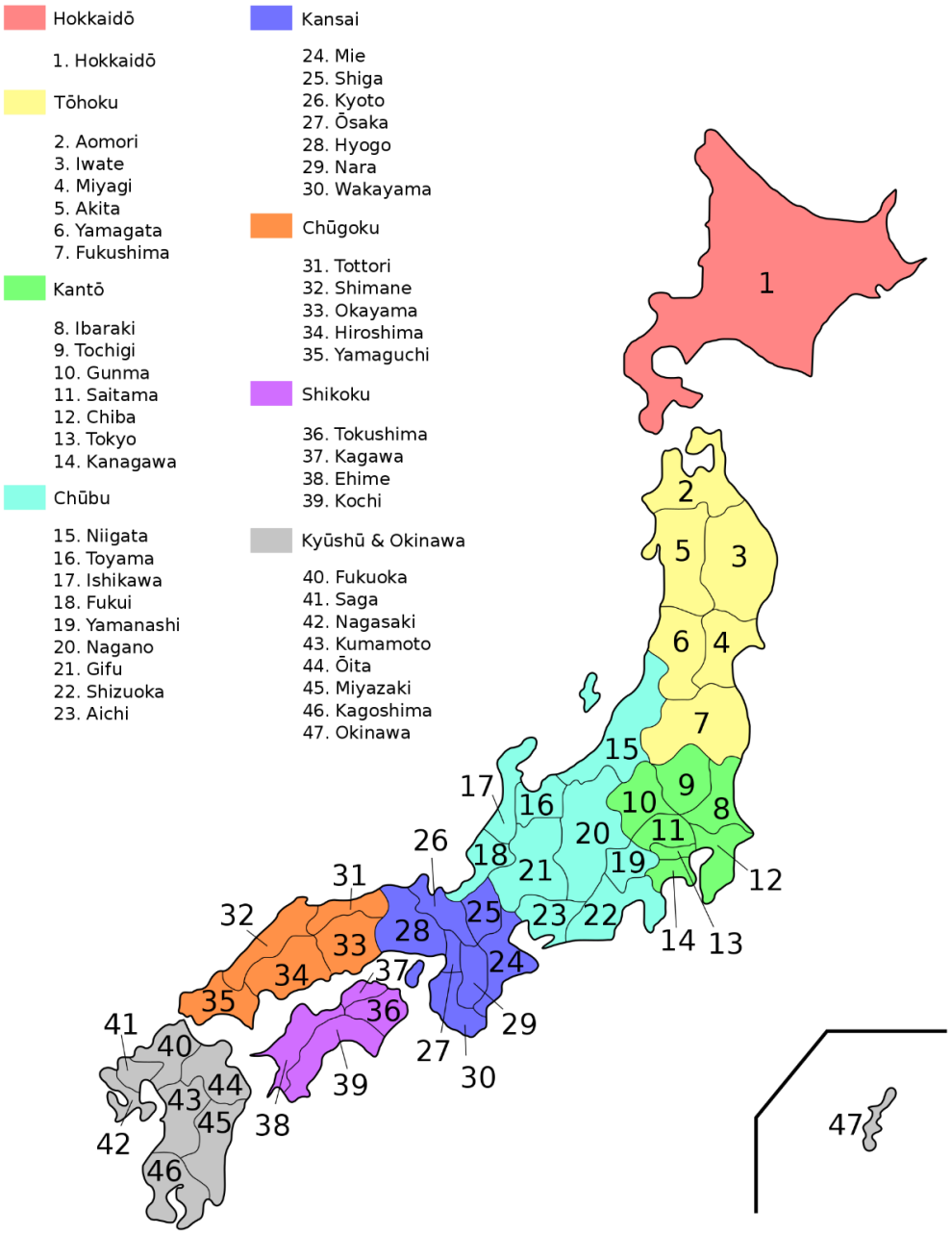
# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| JRS | Japan Revitalisation Strategy |
| JA or JA Group | Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives |
| NSSZ | National Strategic Special Zone |
| CR | Critical Realism |
| REF | Realist Evaluation Framework |
| CDS | Capitalist Developmental State |
| LDP | Liberal Democratic Party |
| DPJ | Democratic Party of Japan |
| MAFF | Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries |
| LAT | Local Allocation Tax |
| NTD | National Treasury Disbursements |
| TTP | Trans-Pacific Partnership |
| TITP | Technical Intern Training Program |
| WSR | Work Style Reform |

*Illustration 1: Map of Japan*

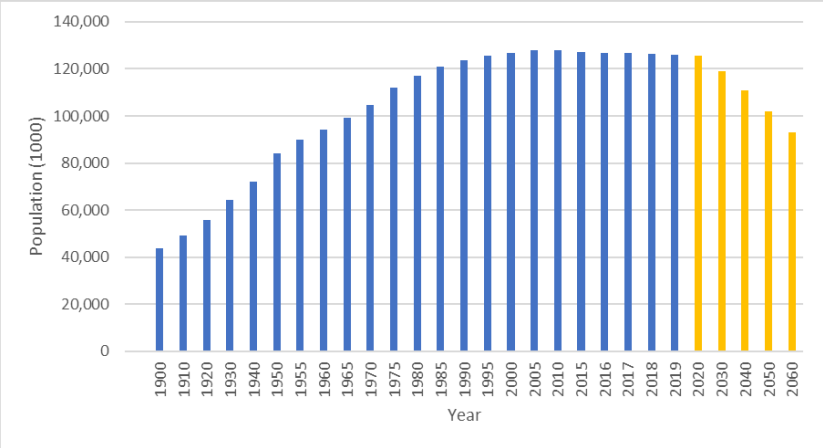



Source: ("Regions and Prefectures of Japan" 2009)

# Introduction

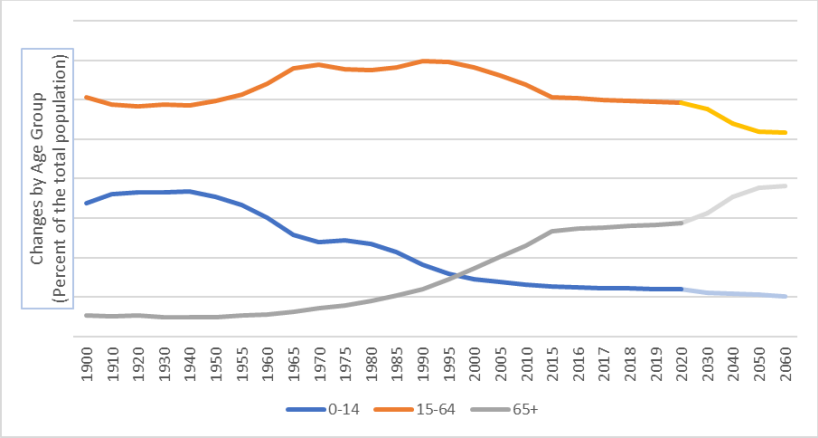
In the last twenty years, the rural population in OECD countries has been continuing to decline ("Rural Population" 2022). With only 8 percent of its population being classified as rural and the advance of the so-called post demographic transition, Japan seems to precede other high income countries in the loss of rural diversity. However, differently from most of the world, it is not only the rural population that is declining in Japan: the whole population is. Since the 1980s, births have been steadily decreasing (Table 1 and 2). In 2015, Japan reported the first negative growth (MIAFC 2021).

*Table 1: Japanese Population Trends with Future Projections (1872-2060)*




Data source: (MIAFC 2021). Gold lines indicate future projections.

*Table 2: Changes in Age Composition with Future Projections (1900-2060)*




Data source: (MIAFC 2021). Lighter lines indicate future projections.

What makes Japan an interesting country to observe rural change in the context of the unfolding of demographic changes is not only the severity of the phenomenon, but also the degree of public

awareness about it. Outside Japan, the debate about demographic changes has been dominated by politicians, local government officials, academics, and journalists, with little consideration of people's opinions on what these changes mean to them (Van Dalen and Henkens 2011). In Japan too, demographic changes cause upset at the upper levels. Governments in charge of finding solutions to the problem suffer from the psychological legacy of decades of population growth (Lutz and Gailey 2020). In a political economy, an individual represents a worker, a consumer, a taxpayer, a recipient of public spending, and/or a voter, entering in different statistical accounts as its role changes. When (certain categories of) people become a relatively scarce commodity, however paradoxical this sounds in a 'dual speed' world expected to reach 9.7 billion people in 2050 (UN n.d.; *The Conversation* 2016), and when the composition of society shifts, social, economic and cultural changes are to be expected. The balance upon which the institutions of the past were built starts faltering and new ones need to be created. Demographic changes thus contribute to framing policy, overlapping with other concerns of the political economy.

However, in Japan, the public too is widely aware of the existence of the problems attached to demographic changes. In 2005, together with the census questionnaire, the authorities distributed the projections of the shrinking population, and from there on the public has been mentally prepared for the upcoming decline (Coulmas 2007). Demographic changes are penetrating everyday life and every place, changing the way people build their lives and imagine their futures to an extent which is not matched in most of the world. This is especially true for rural citizens, considering the prospect of disappearance that many rural socio-economies face after decades of haemorrhage of population and the arrival of the ageing society.

The situation in Japan is very delicate. Although seemingly separated, the destiny of rural and urban socio-economies has always been tied, especially through internal migratory flows which are still leading to concentration in Tokyo. At present, demographic changes are disproportionately affecting rural areas, exposing them to potential extinction, but they are expected to start crunching the total urban population in the near future. Support for rural socio-economies in the present is counterbalanced at the national level by concerns for the future of urban ones. Almost like a preview, rural socio-economies show the areas in which socio-economic systems might collapse under the pressure of demographic changes. But urban areas are not untouched by demographic changes. Resources to cope with the situation are limited and the allocation of resources and policies will be dependent on how each territory is going to be valued.

Rural citizens want their hometowns to become resilient and reproduce themselves in the future. However, how to achieve this aim is another matter. Japan is still looking for ways to adapt to the challenges of demographic changes, and it is doing so without previous models to which to look for inspiration. Demographic changes affect the way economies work, posing challenges to

growth and increasing social provision costs. In parallel, demographic changes are only one manifestation of long-standing problems rural areas have accumulated throughout their history, as rural economies appear to have lost ground in terms of competitiveness. Hence, whether rural areas will see a future and how this future is going to be built in an uncertain context seems to depend on the actions of those who can contribute to building rural resilience. It is going to be a matter of choices, individual and collective.

## Background of the research

The issue of how to build resilient socio-economies has been tackled under various academic agendas, and of particular popularity are those concerning rural development and rural resilience. For decades, scholars have investigated the sources or dynamic forces potentially leading to the betterment of the regional, local and/or rural socio-economic fabric, and in so doing some have attempted to define what exactly such betterment entails — that is to say, what resilience or development mean, can be observed and, contentiously, practised. Debates on rural development and resilience have helped contextualising the research questions and provided its background motivations, and thus assist in framing the new insights (i.e., contributions) the research aims to advance.

### Insights from a twin literature: how recent debates on rural development inspired the research

The literature on rural development provides a first significant input for the motivations of the study because, with specifications, it recognises the importance that states, enterprises and civil society have in producing (rural) change, while eschewing direct and explicit questions about the extent to which they embrace the roles attributed to them or where these roles stem from. In so doing, it has thus diminished the focus on the interests, rights and duties that states, enterprises and civil society each have in the relative betterment, and occasionally the same survival, of rural socio-economies. As Lowe and colleagues highlight, '[t]he patterns and trajectories of socio-economic development must be distinguished from agencies' strategies' (Lowe, Murdoch, and Ward 1995, 92), and it is the former that constitutes the core of the development literature. Hence, scholars have focused on the efficacy and outcomes of various drivers of rural development, disentangling the strengths and weaknesses of past and current approaches (Bosworth et al. 2015; Woods 2011c; Milone, Ventura, and Ye 2015b, 2015a; van der Ploeg, Ye, and Schneider 2015; Lowe, Murdoch, and Ward 1995; Gkartzios and Lowe 2019), and the main question is still how to achieve development and which practices and actors work best, and to do so by joining academic thinking with pragmatical needs to benefit rural socio-economies.

Although perspectives on rural development are constantly evolving and not mutually exclusive (see Table 3 for the specific characteristics of each approach), most recently it is the neo-endogenous approach that has caught scholars' attention, and because of that is the channel to understand recent debates. Described as 'a perspective on the governance of rural development' which accepts that 'knowledge is produced by various agents' (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019, n.a.), the neo-endogenous approach constitutes a hybrid approach where 'rural development … is locally rooted, but outward-looking and characterised by dynamic interactions between local areas and their wider environments' (paraphrasing Ray 2001, ibid.). Accordingly, studies concentrate 'explicitly on the creation, valorisation and continuation of both local and extra-local networks that facilitate knowledge exchange that create opportunities for the benefit of rural areas' (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019, n.a.) and on 'the relationships between "local and extra-local" and "top-down and bottom-up" forces within contemporary rural development' (Bosworth et al. 2015, 428). As a hybrid approach, aspects of previous development models are reconceived by selectively borrowing the positive sides of each approach, such as the greater capacity of the state to mobilise resources from the exogenous model and the empowerment of localities as makers of their own destiny from the endogenous model (Navarro, Woods, and Cejudo 2015), thus overcoming the tendency to see rural development as dependent on urban centres (Slee 1994, in Lowe Murdoch and Ward 1995; Fine 2000). Hence, the neo-endogenous approach has gradually gained support as a powerful, promising narrative and practice of rural development, investigating how the intrinsic 'potential' of rural socio-economies can be maximised towards (unspecified, locally determined) aims.

*Table 3: Rural Development Models and Approaches*

| **Type** | **Exogenous** | **Endogenous** | **Neo-endogenous** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Key principle** | Economies of scale and concentration | The specific resources of an area (natural, human and cultural) hold the key to its sustainable development | Socio-spatial justice and balancing local needs while competing for extra-local people, resources, skills and capital |
| **Dynamic force** | Urban growth poles. The main forces of development conceived as emanating from outside rural areas | Local initiative and enterprise | Fostering a new urban-rural and local-global relationship through inclusive, multi-scalar and multi-sectoral governance arrangements |
| **Function of rural areas** | Food and other primary production for the expanding urban economy | Diverse service economies | Sustaining rural livelihoods, while maintaining natural capital<br><br>A mosaic of re-emerging productivist functions and |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | consumerist uses (including housing, services) |
| **Major rural areas problems** | Low productivity and peripherality | The limited capacity of areas and social groups to participate in economic and development activity | Exclusive countrysides<br><br>Neoliberal deregulation versus policy apathy and lack of regulation<br><br>Climate change challenges<br><br>Economic crisis |
| **Focus of rural development** | Agricultural industrialisation and specialisation<br><br>Encouragement of labour and capital mobility | Capacity building (skills, institutions and infrastructure)<br><br>Overcoming social exclusion | Place-making and community wellbeing<br><br>Building resilient rural places<br><br>Coping with the new politics of austerity<br><br>Coping with emerging geographies of exclusion and (im)mobility triggered by economic crises<br><br>Realising and valorising alternatives to development (especially non neoliberal) in times of crisis |
| **Table adapted from:** (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019) | | | |

Displaying such a high degree of sensitivity towards local and non-local dynamics, and top-down and bottom-up approaches, it would be legitimate to expect that *the roles that states and agents of the socio-economy want to and are able to play would be questioned rather than having to be inferred*, that is to say, that strategies for rural development are evaluated not only based on the performance of a programme in terms of processes or outcomes as it is often the case, but also on the genuineness of the intents of initiating stakeholders, thus establishing what type of priority rural development holds for the collective society, be it at the national or local level. Arguably, as an interaction of top-down and bottom-up forces, multi-level analyses would require grasping the formation of development as an encounter among practices and discourses, a dialogue which is not linear and likely will include diverging opinions, motives, aspirations.

This quest might produce, nonetheless, less than satisfactory results. On one side, it should be expected that, as a literature focused on governance recognising 'the importance of multi-stakeholders rural governance frameworks, in which the state but also other actors such as rural entrepreneurs and third sector organizations are increasingly acknowledged as relevant partners for rural development' (Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy 2022, 1192), the state is not the key focus in the equation. Many scholars working on neo-endogenous approaches research the LEADER programme, the programme *par excellence* symbolising neo-endogenous development co-financed by the European Union (Bosworth et al. 2015; Saraceno 2013), with a complex, multi-level governance structure which effectively has given local socio-economies the opportunity to diversify the sources of support[1]. Outside the EU, such governance mechanisms might be lacking, and the role of the state might be more pronounced. Such is the case of Japan, where local socio-economies do not have many opportunities outside national boundaries, but rather below it at different administrative levels or in the private sector.

On the other side, however, the main issue is that the neo-endogenous approach sees the state as a facilitator, ideally committed or willing to commit to 'capacity building and collaborative working with local organisations and communities' (Bosworth et al. 2015, 430), 'an enabler of a context which facilitates the emergence and development of local (community-based) initiatives … rather than as an actor that directly organizes and implements projects'(Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy 2022, 1195). If not operating in highly decentralised and devolved systems, then, and this is an important point, the state *should* coordinate to identify, reflect, and deliver on needs that are extremely diverse, putting the well-being of local socio-economies as a priority — heavy assumptions considering that peripherality as a concept has been used to indicate not only geographical and social remoteness, but also the low importance of some socio-economies in the political arena (Máliková, Farrell, and McDonagh 2016). Hence, unless the role of the central state in rural development is conflated to distributing funds or resources to local socio-economies or to protect them from the vagaries of domestic and international capitalism (which, to be clear, might be legitimate requests under specific circumstances), with little control over how resources are spent (which might, at the very least, present important accountability issues and in some cases considerations about structural reforms), the proposal must be clear as to if and how states are likely to engage in this enabling role, and, when they claim to do so, whether they practise as they preach. What happens if, differently said, the state does not live up to these expectations? Will other actors in the economy be able and willing to self-sustain their socio-economies?

[1] The LEADER programme involves the EU, Member States (national governments), regional governments, Local Action Groups that often include local administrations, and participants in a certain initiative.

To this regard, much attention has been given to the way through which various agents participate in the economy. Undeniably, a multitude of agents co-participate in the development of a socio-economy, as research has widely shown (Atterton and Thompson 2010; Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy 2022; Furmankiewicz, Janc, and Macken-Walsh 2016). How scholars choose their focus is sometimes ambiguous, although the 'pragmatic' aspect of rural scholarship makes it so that there are tight relationships between researchers, localities, and projects under study (an old story in the rural literature, see: Newby 1980). Moreover, as an engaged agenda towards empowerment, the relevance of agents in the neoendogenous approach can be assessed on a number of parameters beyond numerical and quantitative indicators and beyond present conditions, based on their potential and not on representativeness (e.g., Bosworth and Atterton 2012). Rural scholars emphasise disproportionately the social aspects of development and the processes that participative practices foster compared to general scholars, despite the fact that a successful social development might 'only be possible with a solid economic foundation' (Margarian 2011, 3).

But these agents are not all the same, and neither are the expectations placed upon them. An important, simplified, and well-known distinction which might make the differences of places and not often explicitly mentioned is that agents can be divided based on what they largely depend upon for their survival and on their likely presence in the territory: those who necessarily survive by participating in the market, enterprises of various types which exist in all capitalist socio-economies (the private sector, including social enterprises), and those who do not rely on the market to exist, including governmental organisations (the public sector), necessarily present in some form and shape in the majority of localities, and non-governmental organisations (the Third Sector), whose availability depends on the vibrancy of civil society. When approaching a certain socio-economy, the specific combination of agents will change, and their collective 'contributions' to society will be differently evaluated. Excluding the public sector, the Third Sector tends to operate on an altruistic basis to contribute to social development and depends on its ability to attract funds (and/or voluntary efforts) for its continuation (Furmankiewicz, Janc, and Macken-Walsh 2016), whereas agents in the private sector have a greater capacity for autonomous self-reproduction, including through 'self-exploitation'.

It is because of the latter capacity to self-reproduce and redistribute wealth to local citizens that private economic agents have been seen in the last decades as the core targets of rural development. This is true also in Japan. Entrepreneurship, and in particular 'local' entrepreneurship, has been regarded as a tool 'to tackle deep-rooted economic problems in low-income communities and distressed regions' (Dabson 2001, 35) and rural entrepreneurs have been highly praised for their direct and indirect contributions to local socio-economies (Steiner

and Atterton 2015), which are posited to flourish thanks to the rural context. Rural entrepreneurs are increasingly expected to support their societies, but the literature fails to tackle if and how they intend to do so. Rural entrepreneurs do not necessarily pursue a specific social aim, nor should it be taken for granted that they necessarily feel a responsibility to do so. In good part, this derives from a lack of specificity of what exactly development is about, a dimension in which the pragmatic nature of rural development seems insufficiently developed. The debate on resilience assisted in defining the problem.

## Resilience re-dimensioned

Although resilience and development can be treated as different concepts, it is common that in the social sciences the two are summoned together to indicate the betterment of existing socio-economic problems present in a certain socio-economy(Dawley, Pike, and Tomaney 2010). The resilience literature constitutes part of the background of the research, fundamentally bringing to light the most 'pragmatic' aspect of the research: how can we observe the betterment of rural societies? How should it be defined?

It is challenging to define what a resilient socio-economy is. When one looks at the existing literature, the answers have been extremely different. The notion of resilience spread into the social sciences after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. There are many debates revolving around its definition and measurements (Carpenter et al. 2001; Folke et al. 2010b; Quinlan et al. 2016; Adam-Hernández and Harteisen 2020) (Table 4). In general, resilience is referred to as a 'framework' (Simmie and Martin 2010), an 'approach' or a way of 'thinking' (Folke 2016) whose fundamental focus is on the sustainability, crises, and adaptive capacities of certain systems to shocks (see: Resilience Alliance n.d.; Holling, Berkes, and Folke 1998; Folke et al. 2010a; Perrings, Turner, and Folke 1995; Folke 2016).

In the social sciences, the territorial dimension of resilience has been explored especially by economic geographers, especially at the regional scale. Regional resilience has often been measured through large-scale economic indicators such as variations in employment rates, GDP or GVAs, income, and firms' birth and mortality rates, or in changes in the industrial structure of regions (Briguglio 2016; Briguglio et al. 2009; Di Caro and Fratesi 2018; Di Caro 2017; Bristow and Healy 2018; Duval, Elmeskov and Vogel 2007; Navarro-Espigares, Martín-Segura, and Hernández-Torres 2012; Di Caro 2018; Brown and Greenbaum 2017). Others have proposed studying resilience based on multiple subsystems (Simmie and Martin 2010; Martin and Sunley 2015; Martin and Sunley 2017). Indeed, the resilience literature is rich in perspectives, but also, and maybe too much, focused on large shocks, those for which change is drastic and quickly accumulated.

*Table 4: Resilience, definitions in different domains*

| Denomination | Definition | Emphasis | Key References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Engineering resilience | System's speed of return to equilibrium following a shock | Return time to recover, efficiency, equilibrium | Pimm (1984) |
| Ecological resilience | Ability of a system to withstand shock and maintain critical relationships and functions | Buffer capacity, withstand shock, persistence, robustness | Holling (1996) |
| Social-ecological resilience | (i) Amount of disturbance a system can absorb and remain within a domain of attraction; (ii) capacity for learning and adaptation; (iii) degree to which the system is capable of self-organizing | Adaptive capacity, learning, innovation | Carpenter *et al.* (2001) |
| Social resilience | Ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change | Social dimensions, heuristic device | Adger (2000) |
| Socioeconomic resilience | Socioeconomic resilience refers to the policy-induced ability of an economy to recover from or adjust to the negative impacts of adverse exogenous shocks and to benefit from positive shocks | Economic response capacity | Mancini *et al.* (2012) |
| Community resilience | A process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance | Adaptive capacity, disturbance, social | Norris *et al.* (2012) |
| Regional economic resilience | Capacity of a regional economy to absorb and rebound from a shock, that is, recover or even improve its 'core performance'—such as its rate of economic growth, or the full employment of its workforce—by undergoing structural, functional and organizational change. | Adaptive capacity | Martin and Sunley (2015) |
| Table adapted from Quinlan et al. (2016, 678) and Martin and Sunley (2015) | | | |

At the local level, however, the notion of resilience takes a different shape. Authors have recently argued that definitions and question formulation about resilience should be 'situated' within political and cultural heterogeneities (Cote and Nightingale 2012). This is also recognised by McIntosh and colleagues (2008), who have elaborated on the difficulties in understanding or measuring rural resilience in recognition of the fact that the 'four capitals' supposedly making rural resilience, the human, social, produced and natural capital, are not evenly distributed among societies in different territories. Local or rural resilience can mean as much providing employment and connecting supply chains (Cabras and Mount 2016) as stopping migration towards urban centres after major crisis (Şerban and Tălângă 2015). Indeed, resilience is not a one-size-fit-all issue or solution. It can be a case-to-case issue, or a general one with local applications.

Hence, rather than embarking on complex measurements or definitions of what resilience is, a pragmatic approach was taken. As it was seen in the very first paragraphs of the introduction, a

major problem for many rural socio-economies is the changes in population which pose an existential threat to their continuation. As the notion of resilience is almost absent in the Japanese social sciences, resilience is understood as synonymous to the concept of revitalisation, all those attempts to '[alleviate] the exhaustion of regional economies caused by the population decrease and [to get] the economies back on their feet' (*Highlighting Japan* 2018, 7). In other countries, resilience might be defined in a different way, depending on what is or is perceived as the biggest problem.

Situating a problem also means understanding what solutions are deemed possible, feasible, or desirable in a certain context. It might be tempting to list all the challenges and possible solutions to a problem, but there might be reasons why only few will actually be considered. Often choices are constrained, and change is a tough battle. There is more desire for change than capacity to bring it. As debates in rural development have raised, the making of rural socio-economies will be dependent on the interactions between various actors in the socio-economy, but the argument is that such interaction needs to be observed as an encounter, so that proposals to renew the socio-economy can reflect upon the arguments and counterarguments advanced by different parties. In Japan, as it will be explored, many hypotheses have been made by policy makers and economists on how the worst consequences of demographic challenges could be attenuated by private economic agents, but the bulk of the attention is on how private economic agents can change their practices and meet social needs. Little attention has been given, on the contrary, on how the state, policy makers and those who have power could bring change. Despite the fact that policies to incentivise rural resilience are dependent on the state, its interest in actively participating in the making of rural resilience is either naively taken for granted or not questioned at all. The thesis aims at picking up such underexplored issues.

## Theoretical Background

In order to study how change might take place in rural socio-economies, it is necessary to understand what the rural is, or why it is special. Looking for theories of rural change, however, is not a straightforward exercise. Just as Copp stated,

> There is no rural society and there is no rural economy. It is merely our analytic distinction, our rhetorical device. Unfortunately we tend to be the victims of our own terminological duplicity. We tend to ignore the import of what happens in the total economy and society as it affects the rural sector. We tend to think of the rural sector as a separate entity which can be developed while the non-rural sector is held constant. Our thinking is ensnared by our own words (cited in Newby 1980, 8).

The fact that rural socio-economies might be referred to as or suggested as a coherent or homogeneous group does not correspond to the reality that socio-economies in places present

immense diversity among themselves. Even if rural socio-economies might be all small economies, they present very different configurations. The rural as a category retains collective associations to a space where individual actors and structures were once organised around a (relatively) homogeneous socio-economy based on production for consumption – the agrarian economy (Mormont 1990; Buttel and McMichael 1988; Caporaso and Levine 1992; Davoudi and Stead 2002; Lapping 2005; Murdoch et al. 2003; Woods and Heley 2017). With capitalism established as the dominant system, the rural has stopped making sense as a self-defining category, and scholars started wondering if the rural was as much a 'temporal' as a spatial category (Gilbert 1982). Nonetheless, many of the associations with the rural as it was, or as it has been constructed in the collective and subjective imaginary, are still strong: the rural idyll, the agricultural society, the simplicity of life, the search for communities and so forth are associations commonly made by individuals and embedded in the institutions that regulate the political economy and in the way the state relates with territories. Still today, when tackling rural issues, the underlying assumption is that there are relationships associated with the concept of rural which help to understand how the spatial and the social system interact to produce certain outcomes.

The precarious certainties one might have on what the rural is before studying it can however dissipate gradually. It is only in the process of fieldwork, data collection and data analysis that one might come to appreciate, through experience, why the literature has been so dedicated to warning about the fuzziness of the concept. The tensions between generalisations and particularisations cannot be avoided by scholars working with space if not by pretending they do not exist: is there really a 'recipe' for rural resilience? Or is it just resilience? Even though rural socio-economies are disappearing, problems affect citizens and societies, not space properly speaking. Making an argument that rural socio-economies, and their citizens, deserve a different treatment, strategies other than those available to the rest of people, requires some justification. For long, agriculture has played this unifying role, but are there other ways in which today's rural socio-economies can appeal together and collectively receive the resources needed for their continuation?

Whereas recently scholars have eschewed the concept of rural, the research explicitly engages with it and the relative literature to reveal how (rural) space is significant in discerning solutions for the creation of resilience. At its core, the research does not endorse a specific, predictive theory on the rural, rural socio-economies, or rural resilience. Differences between rural areas and the similarities between urban and rural areas are simply too substantial (Hoggart 1990; Hoggart and Paniagua 2001), and it is a fact accepted by most scholars that societies cannot be read from space. In disconnection with most recent works, the emphasis of the thesis is not on demonstrating the diversity between rural socio-economies, which is a necessary by-product of

an exploration which has not a comparative dimension. Rather, the research is an exploration about how socio-economies might be grouped or decide to group together in the political economy, and how this process of generalisation might effectively influence their resilience (for the good or the bad) and how resources are allocated to them. Moreover, the investigation is directed at looking at the rural as it is practised, rather than only as described in texts.

To do so, the research leverages on two approaches to the study of rural phenomena, embedded in a multi-layered case study design which, on the one hand, is organised around the Japan Revitalisation Strategy, a national plan to revolutionise the way the Japanese economy works and should adapt to the challenges of the hyper-aged society, and, on the other hand, focuses the strategies and motivations advanced by the main stakeholders, and in particular the state and private economic agents, on shaping resilience in the Japanese countryside. Firstly, the approach used to study resilience is that of the rural-as-a-locality. Localities are laboratories for the study of wider phenomena (Newby 1986), and the research sites, Yabu and Asago in the Tajima area of the Hyogo Prefecture, could be understood as places where the main issue to be tackled is how to stop and counteract the negative consequences of demographic changes. The research thus investigates how state and private economic agents in Yabu and Asago understand and act upon demographic changes while carrying out their habitual operations, as well as exploring the changing notions of roles and responsibilities in making resilience. Secondly and importantly, to observe rural resilience in the making means recognising that the rural, and space, is also interpreted and constructed. The perspectives on the rural adopted by those who have the ability to produce and reproduce rural socio-economies and spaces is then what matters. The framework that allows to analyse how different interpretations of the rural might coexist and contemporaneously shape the rural is Lefebvre's spatial triad, brought in the sphere of rural studies by Halfacree (2006). The spatial triad is the main reference framework to explore how *rural* resilience, not just resilience, is shaped. In particular, Lefebvre's distinction of representations of spaces, whereby the state conceives space, and spaces of representations, whereby individuals create space, is used to investigate the spatial element of resilience. The case study is thus centred on a specific policy tool contained in the Japan Revitalisation Strategy, the National Strategic Special Zones, with its particular nuances.

The main aim of the research is thus to understand how rural resilience can be generated. The research argues that how resilience can be created depends on how those who have been most directly responsible for the development of rural socio-economies not only define the problem, but define and relate to the rural. In particular, the research aims to answer two overarching questions:

To what extent can the state shape rural resilience?

To what extent can private economic agents shape rural resilience?

## Contributions

The research aims to add to existing knowledge and academic practice in rural studies in several directions, previewed here and fully elaborated at the end of the thesis. Most importantly, the study attempts to provide a case which explores the interconnections between state and private economic agents in forging the resilience of rural socio-economies without hiding or undervaluing the importance of the concept of rural — hence advancing a constructive criticism to the many studies that take the concept as something unambiguous, to be taken for granted, or entirely discarded. It also complements studies focusing on processes in the countryside to highlight how the motivations and strategies of the different stakeholders frame problems and solutions, thus portraying resilience as a situated effort built also by agents in the economy.

Secondly, the research builds towards efforts to understand resilience as a debate, where the strategies and motivations of different stakeholders need to be simultaneously considered to understand how people in rural socio-economies can better guarantee their own survival. To pursue such goal, the study utilises a multi-level analysis structured around three elements: the Lefebvre's spatial triad as elaborated by Halfacree (2006) serves to study the production of rural space; the Realist Evaluation Framework (Pawson and Tilley 2004) provides support to analyse state intervention in rural socio-economies; and a more empirical approach captures private economic agents' role in the making of the rural and rural resilience. It posits that such multi-level analysis, together with the case study construction, allow the emergence of existing contradictions in the political economy which have important implications for how rural resilience might be achieved.

In terms of new empirical, methods-related, and research practice insights, the research covers several aspects of potential interest to researchers from different fields, Of particular relevance for scholars focusing on entrepreneurship, the research offers a critical reading of how to interpret the contributions of private economic agents to societal challenges, purporting that the notion of contribution should not be uniquely self-assessed by participants as it is common in empirical studies, but rather related to the problems studied. Such exercise enables a better understanding of the potential and limitations of private economic agents in rural resilience, capturing their adaptational efforts and how they participate in the future of the local socio-economies and laying the basis to question whether, as societies, we want to trust the future of our collectives in their hands.

Scholars working in international environments might benefit from the detailed description of the challenges in dealing with data collection and data analysis, as the research offers various inputs for more reflective research practices when dealing with foreign contexts. At the same time, the thesis provides a valuable perspective on what the rural is in Japan, confronting the important geographical biases rural studies present (Woods 2012; Shucksmith and Brown 2016). Obviously, what matters here is not adding another country to the list of rural studies, but rather exploring how notions that seem taken for granted in Europe, UK, US and so forth are not readily available in countries such as Japan, and hence constructing a case on rural resilience means translating and dissecting the core of these concepts. Equally important, and maybe slightly less recognised, is that the role of the researcher might change too when approaching foreign context. The research presents at the end some reflections on how the role of the researcher might be impacted by the context, in the hope that this reflexivity might inspire other scholars to dig more deeply into their own involvement with the rural.

## Overview of the chapters

The thesis is composed of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the most problematic aspect of the research: the concept of the rural. Understanding what constitutes the rural is part of the problem itself. The literature review, narrative in style and oriented towards conceptual more than empirical works, highlights the various solutions that have been adopted by rural scholars to confront the elusiveness of the concept.

Chapter 2 presents the contextual elements needed to frame the findings and the questions in Japan. Firstly, it introduces the history of the relationship between the state and rural socio-economies in Japan. In particular, it shows how Japanese rural areas have traditionally been defined and seen by the state in terms of agriculture or natural resources, and the long-term consequences such a relationship has had on how the rural and rural problems are framed. Secondly, the chapter introduces the grey literature on how demographic changes deeply affect Japan, and particularly rural areas, and what measures could be taken to alleviate their severity.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological underpinnings of the study. The chapter presents in detail how the case study was built in multiple steps. The section proceeds to explain how some elements of Critical Realism (hereafter, CR) helped inform the research. Finally, the chapter also presents the Realist Evaluation Framework and the research methods. Two sections, that on sampling and that on recruitment, describe some of the difficulties in doing fieldwork in Japan.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 introduce the findings. In particular, Chapter 4 concentrates on the conceived rural, the rural as made by the state and as seen through the Japanese Revitalisation Strategy.

Chapters 5 and 6 introduce how the conceived rural meets with the spaces of representation of private economic agents, and how these representations find their way into new and old spatial practices.

Finally, Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of the thesis by discussing the two main research questions: how can the state influence rural resilience and how can private economic agents influence rural resilience. It includes reflections on how rural resilience can be achieved and identifies the limitations of the study and future directions for research.

# 1. Approaches to the Rural and Rural Socio-Economies

The concept of rural has long been considered problematic, not only because of the multidisciplinarity and the evolution of the rural academia, but also because of the implications that come with its definition and adoption towards framing rural problems in our societies. The unstable foundations upon which the concept lies become only more evident when approaching international settings and the translation of this Latin-derived term appears as the most immediate instance in which the difficulties in theoretically defining the rural emerge. Therefore, whereas the leading question of the research is to what extent the state and private economic agents, defined to include entrepreneurs, enterprises, SMEs and companies, can play a role in creating rural resilience, what is understood by rural is in many ways participating to define who or what should be the beneficiaries of and/or responsible for any efforts in the management of diverse rural problems. As such, the rural is the main theme of the following narrative literature review.

In particular, the chapter aims at elucidating how approaches to the rural, rather than being mutually exclusive, coexist when analysing specific problems and become important for understanding rural resilience at different points of analysis. Equally important, the chapter attempts to introduce how the various selected elements of approaches towards studying the rural are embedded in the research, and, as such, it may be understood both as a methodological section introducing and complementary to the heuristic tools of the Realist Evaluation Framework proposed to analyse state actions.

The chapter is organised in two sections. The first section starts with an overview of the field of rural studies and the elusiveness of the concept of rural. It later introduces the key conceptual features of the field to highlight the extent to which the vagueness of the concept has had repercussions on the framing and studying of rural issues.

The second section moves towards presenting through the four definitions of the rural, the relevant literature on state, rural socio-economies, and private economic agents. In particular, descriptive definitions present some core features of rural economies as they are classified, and the overarching problems and opportunities they present. It is also the way states define and classify territories under homogeneous categories. Socio-cultural definitions of the rural are relevant in terms of presenting and problematising the literature on rural entrepreneurship. While it is intuitive that rural private economic agents are among the most important players in the socio-economic system, the ahistorical nature of works on rural entrepreneurship, their overly localised emphasis, and their normative stance make this body of work especially problematic. Following, the section presents the perspectives of the rural as a locality. On the one

hand, a thread of literature known as the New Political Economy of Agriculture or New Rural Sociology emphasised agriculture as the distinguishing mark of the rural. While this literature might seem outdated, the argument is that it is fairer to treat it as a way of interpreting the formation of the relationship between the state and rural socio-economies. The effects of such a historical relationship, and therefore their actuality, depend on the situation of the country studied, or, if we want, whether the 'agricultural issue' has been solved. On the other hand, in consideration of the decline of the agricultural sector, works focused on the restructuring of rural socio-economies, highlighting major trends and recognising the role of the state in shaping the rural. Finally, after a very short introduction to the rural as a social representation, the relational rural is explained. In particular, Halfacree's three-fold architecture is posited to be an appropriate tool to present the complexity encountered when studying rural resilience, as it leverages on the strengths of each approach. It is an inclusive approach.

## 1.1 An elusive concept: the rural and the field of rural studies

The issue of whether political economic approaches can be applied to understand rural change is a daunting one for social scientists in the field of rural studies. Inquiring about the spatial organisation of societies presupposes an existing relation between those elements of space concerning the natural environment, the physicality of territories and landscapes, and those elements of space relating to the human environment, the web of relationships, relations, rules, norms, institutions, and cognitive frameworks which govern societies and individuals' activities within differentiated territorial and organisational boundaries.

It Is within the range of this vaguely defined relation that one finds a great diversity of traditions that has contributed to the evolution of the field of rural studies. Rural social scientists traditionally included rural sociologists, rural anthropologists, rural geographers, and rural economists, as well as rural historians, and rural political scientists, to name some, seldom sharing more than an adjective. The rural appears as a distinguishing mark in the academic chessboard, something that has the ability to differentiate scholars involved in their general disciplines from those who engage with 'rural things'. However, the more the literature enters further down into specialisations, tackling all the aspects relating to rural socio-economies, the harder it becomes to understand what is significant about the rural.

Whereas the cross-breeding among disciplines in approaching the rural is partially a by-product of the nature of geography as a 'bridging discipline' (Youngblood 2007), it can make studying rural phenomena at best a confusing endeavour. As a matter of fact, rural studies did not even formally start within geography if it is accepted that shared intentions and a minimum of academic organisation are *conditiones sine quibus non* for describing a field of study. It was in

sociology that the first structured subfield appeared. The issue is that, taken by itself as a substantive, the concept of rural has been recognised for its elusiveness and debatable heuristic potential, or, as elegantly explained by Dymitrow and Brauer, forms a 'meaningful-useless combination' in terms of knowledge production, possessing the property of vestigiality in biology whereby 'genetically determined structures that have apparently lost most or all of their ancestral function […] have been retained in spite of their evolutionary progress' (2018, 201). This combination, resulting from the appropriation of common linguistic terms across disciplines with different epistemological and metaphysical grounds, is deemed by Dymitrow and Brauer to render difficult or impossible to communicate with stability the same meaning across recipients. Understandably, the only consensus reached among scholars seems to be that there is not a single definition of what rural stands for, accompanied by a sense of despair and/or dismissal about definitional issues (Friedland 2002) and by conciliatory efforts to give to the various *rurals* the same possibility of being represented (Halfacree 2006; Bell 2007) — at least in academia.

It is then the difficult relationship that rural scholars, or those scholars who investigate rural-related phenomena explicitly, have had with their object of inquiry which is one of the most prominent features of rural studies and one which distinguishes the field from other research arenas, displayed in the intensity and frequency in rounds of reflexivity and dialogue between authors on the *value of the rural* (Friedland 1982). If rural sociology was found as 'born doubting its object — its conceptual right to exist as a subdiscipline' (Gilbert 1982, 612), continuing to do so to the present (Bell 2007; Argent 2016), rural geography yet finds itself in an 'introspective mood' despite the boom in publications and its supposed capacity to adapt to the challenges of our generation (Woods 2009a). Crises and transformations in rural societies and economies have been perceived as crises for the same rural scholarly existence. And if rural academia lives in a constant state of uncertainty, doubts should be raised about how actors within political economies can address problems if the rural is such a slippery category, one which strongly escapes generalisation efforts and which constantly pushes back towards the specific characteristics of the countryside, towns, and villages, the so-called differentiated countryside (Murdoch et al. 2003), at the expense of coherent public policies (Bonnen 1992; Jordan and Halpin 2006; Shortall and Alston 2016; Peterson, McBeth, and Jones 2020).

## 1.2 Defining the rural

Although a disputed concept, rural scholarship has inherited lenses through which to look at the rural in conceptual terms. Halfacree's (1993, 2006) works have been particularly valuable in providing boundaries within which it is possible to articulate discussions on the rural or rural related affairs. He argued that four types of definitions on the rural can be distinguished. The first

three view the rural as a *space* and are, respectively: (i) descriptive definitions, focusing on socio-spatial characteristics or measuring 'rurality', usually quantitative studies (e.g., Cloke and Edwards 1986; Pizzoli and Gong 2007; Pateman 2011; Beynon, Crawley, and Munday 2016; OECD 2019); (ii) socio-cultural definitions, which attempt associations between the spatial environment and the development of specific socio-cultural characteristics, common in older works and lingering in some contemporary applied writings; and (iii) the rural as locality, which partially discards the notion of the rural as significant and concerns itself with the display of different social phenomena in conventionally-defined rural areas. Halfacree's most recognised contribution was to pave a fourth way of understanding the rural, i.e. the rural as a *social representation* (1993), and later, he emphasised how the rural as a locality and the rural as a social representation provide the two key perspectives from which to analyse the architecture of rural space with *a sense of unity* (2006). Below, the attempt is to sketch how different definitions on the rural can lead to dramatically different focus on rural problems. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses.

### 1.2.1 Describing rural environments

Descriptive definitions of the rural are common in empirical works and are usually based on population density and other variables to observe the incidence of a certain phenomenon in given areas. Although apparently innocuous, rural-urban classifications are used mainly as forms of generalisations for policy making, and, as such, can be employed as a major tool to allocate resources and values. They have been deemed essential to assist in designing, implementing and monitoring policy intervention and to study not 'specific places but place in general' (Beynon, Crawley, and Munday 2016, 1136), created to reach the people policies were intended to (Isserman 2005), and to increase transparency and consistency in resource allocation (Pateman 2011). They are, in their essence, criteria for qualified exclusion or inclusion of territorially bounded social groups in terms of socio-economic measures.

From the perspective of private economic agents, a large share of the literature on entrepreneurship posits that geographical location, and the small density of settlements, influences private economic agents' behaviour by creating place-specific challenges and strengths (Aoyama, Murphy, and Hanson 2013). Such differences are often used to justify rural entrepreneurship as a separate area of inquiry from the general field (Fortunato 2014; Pato and Teixeira 2016). Taking a glance at the literature on entrepreneurship, 'successful' socio-economies have often been cited in conjunction with prosperous entrepreneurial ecosystems, 'set[s] of interdependent actors and factors that are governed in such a way that they enable productive entrepreneurship'(Stam 2015, cited in: Stam and van de Ven 2021, 809).

Entrepreneurial ecosystems require the presence of several players and stakeholders, extending beyond but always centred around entrepreneurs, as well as 'recipes' about how these elements need to combine to create a virtuous circle of growth (Malecki 2018). Research has shown that institutional elements — such as the formal institutions, culture and networks — and resource endowments — physical infrastructure, finance, leadership, talent, knowledge, demand and intermediate services — are key to value creation, that is, productive entrepreneurship, but these elements need to coexist and interact to produce systems able to regenerate (Stam and van de Ven 2021). There are still debates as to how to establish the spatial boundaries of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, with a major criticism of the literature being its lack of focus on local (rather than transnational, national, or regional) entrepreneurial ecosystems (Cavallo, Ghezzi, and Balocco 2019). Nonetheless, contextual elements influence the capacity of entrepreneurs to bring vitality to a socio-economy.

Indeed, locational and contextual factors are important to understand how the rural environment might shape enterprises and entrepreneurs, often pinpointing areas of criticality. Hence, rural socio-economies are often portrayed as disadvantaged areas for private economic agents' operations, and, in many ways, they are. They lack the benefits of agglomeration economies in terms of size and quality of the consumer and labour market and innovation systems (Huiban 2011; Aoyama, Murphy, and Hanson 2011a), affecting the feasibility of economies of scale and costs of distribution (Fortunato 2014; Henderson 2002; Korsgaard et al. 2015) and constraining innovation (Pato and Teixeira 2016; Fortunato 2014; Meccheri and Pelloni 2006; Fabert and Gaubert 2018; Young 2016). The rural labour market has also been found to suffer from the lack of high-skilled workers, brain drain and labour mismatches (Fortunato 2014; Hodge et al. 2002; De Hoyos and Green 2011; Goetz 2004). Moreover, as noted by Pender et al. (2012), investments in rural areas are generally risky and are not exonerated from economic considerations, and the provision of public goods and services is less cost-efficient. Better integration through transportation and ICT has been found to have contrasting effects (De Hoyos and Green 2011; Hodge et al. 2002; Shields 2005; Conley and Whitacre 2016), promoting connection as much as incentivising migration.

On the bright side, rural private economic agents might have easier access to natural resources, lower land costs, and cheaper labour — all factors that lower barriers to firm formation. The availability of resources might partially explain why the energy, food and tourism industries emerge as drivers of socio-economic renovation in the rural literature, and surely in the grey literature, which is not covered for brevity. These industries often operate (or are suggested to operate) in synergy with each other. Although the preference of Schumpeterian, disruptive entrepreneurship over incremental, Kirznerian entrepreneurship means the farm-based sector

is frequently off the radar of general entrepreneurship scholars, pluriactivity, and its sub-category of diversification (Blad 2010; Dries, Pascucci, and Gardebroek 2011), remains important for the rural ecosystem. This is because, just as in portfolio entrepreneurship, the first (farm-based) enterprise often functions as a seedbed for the next activities (Alsos et al. 2011), with entrepreneurs moving and utilising resources across different operations, such as transforming raw materials into finished products or opening restaurants and food stores to add value and increase incomes. A special role is often given to traditional local products, especially those with certifications, posited to increase the sense of wellbeing of rural socio-economies by joining resource use, employment opportunities, and publicity of less known places, while feeding the touristic industry while protecting the environment and landscape (Pato and Duque 2023; Sims 2009). Rural resources might also be utilised in the energy industry. Scholars focusing on the low-carbon economy have called for a better understanding of the 'geographies of energy transition' , constituted by the uneven distribution of energy-related activities and the geographical connections and interactions among different places, bringing to light issues of scaling (Bridge et al. 2013, 333). Although Japan is a clear example of the damage the energy industry might bring to rural areas[2], new technological affordances and the wide range of energy sources, be it wind, sun, biomass and so forth, mean rural socio-economies might become investment areas able to provide both business opportunities and to satisfy the energy requirements of places. In particular, smaller scale renewable energy initiatives are carving their space into rural socio-economies, and 'ecopreneurs', entrepreneurs combining environmental awareness with business activities towards sustainable economic development, foster the re-territorialisation of energy (Magnani et al. 2017). Nonetheless, the effects of the green transition on rural employment (quantity and quality of jobs) are reported as unclear or low (OECD 2012).

Although rural resources are an important part of what the rural environment might offer, there is scepticism that the food industry and related tourist activities will be sufficient, or sufficiently developed, to mirror expectations on their role for local socio-economies (Baldacchino 2015; Renko, Renko, and Polonijo 2010), while the direction of the transition towards a green economy is still unclear at the local level. Integration between diverse actors and institutions is fundamental to create positive interactions among businesses (Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias, and Vinzón 2017; Contini, Polidori, and Scarpellini 2009; Tomay and Tuboly 2023), but efforts might lack thrust, especially in places where depopulation and ageing are proceeding fast. Resources might also create path dependence and reduce or obfuscate new opportunities in emerging sectors (Alsos et al. 2011). Furthermore, not all the food manufacturing industry is

[2] How to forget the almost 20,000 casualties of the Fukushima disaster and the successive evacuation of about 164,000 people (Tsuboi et al. 2022; Do 2019).

made by local products or local producers, and not all locals produce or sell local products or share similar ideas of what local food is for. Not only there is empirical evidence that, even when raw materials are available for production, a series of requirements such as distance from the consumers' basis change the convenience of the rural location for food manufacturers (Lambert, Mcnamara, and Garrett 2006), but concepts such as local food are highly contested and shaped by the different interpretations of the people and authorities that use them (Tovey 2008).

Hence,, the rural location is not a general disadvantage or advantage for entrepreneurial efforts but depends on the ability of private economic agents to interpret and evaluate their environments, balancing both objective local resource endowments and subjective familiarity with the surroundings (Huiban 2011; Phillipson et al. 2019; Bar-El and Felsenstein 1990; Aoyama, Murphy, and Hanson 2011b). The literature showing how firms cope and react to locational challenges is rather lacking, and this might be a consequence of the fact that the strategies that individuals devise are scattered and highly contextual. Different entrepreneurial strategies might produce different outcomes and, eventually, contribute to the formation and re-formation of different socio-economies. For instance, companies have been shown to respond differently to a tight labour market, using in-house training, capital investments, or untapped labour resources at their discretion (Jarvis, Dunham, and Ilbery 2006). The rural environment might actually favour innovation by increasing the adaptability of firms (North and Smallbone 2000), and rural firms' innovative output has been shown to be the result of adaptations to supply chain requirements and not location, regardless of the degree of remoteness of the rural area (Jarvis, Dunham, and Ilbery 2006). Many factors contribute to entrepreneurial decisions. Entrepreneurs can, potentially, alter existing structures and create new paths based on their individual characteristics and circumstances, which is why they have been given such a central role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem literature:

> economic agents at the micro level experiment and interact with each other to form a constantly evolving system. Many of these experiments fail, but some succeed and create wealth for society (Beinhocker, 2006). Economic development does not emerge automatically: entrepreneurs are needed to create new value which then circulates throughout the economy (Fayolle, 2007;Schumpeter, 1934). This new value creation is an emerging property of a complex system of economic agents and their interactions: the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Entrepreneurs might structurally change the economy and society, as exemplified with new sets of technologies, institutions, and organizational arrangements (Arthur, 2013; Feldman, 2014). The (regional) economy cannot be separated from the agents and institutions that it is made of but is a result of a "constantly developing set of technological innovations, institutions, and arrangements that draw forth further innovations, institutions and arrangements" (Arthur, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, entrepreneurship is simultaneously the result and mediator of evolution (Day, 1987): entrepreneurial behavior as an output is enabled by the system, while the new value created, and potential structural change as an outcome of the system is mediated by entrepreneurship (Wurth, Stam, and Spigel 2022, 736).

The literature emphasising locational factors has been much better at identifying how the rural areas *might* shape agents' behaviour than how agents shape the rural — it is, in short, what it is, a series or indications of tendencies.

Based on the difficulties described above, rural areas have also been posited to present specific policy needs. States have attempted to act on the rural using broad policies, intervening to placate the most severe effects of the gaps imposed by distance and low-density. While in the past such intervention in place-based routes for rural wealth creation took the form of industrial recruitment strategies or the creation of regional commercial centres, today states tend towards the promotion of SMEs and entrepreneurship, appeals to the creative class and knowledge-based sector, and cluster-based development (Pender, Marre, and Reeder 2012), so to create 'empowered' rural communities (Steiner and Farmer 2018), able to generate endogenous and self-sustaining development.

Nonetheless, this creates an important contradiction for the state's management of rural areas. Generalisations on policy needs based on their degree of rurality quickly fall, as authors have posited that, to be effective, policies should be context-specific, coherent and involving local actors, while ideally avoiding the creation of economic dependency patterns (North and Smallbone 2006; Meccheri and Pelloni 2006). Horizontal policies, such as institutional assistance programmes, may help rural firms reach economies of scale and overcome typical challenges associated with SMEs, such as difficulties in distribution and marketing, innovation and training (Quinn et al. 2014; Danson and Burnett 2014), but their implementation is complex. The power of agricultural lobbies monopolising resources for rural development at the expense of rural businesses' diversity and more general *laissez-faire* attitudes towards SMEs (Fortunato 2014; Scott et al. 2009), vigorous political commitments unmatched by proportionate practical measures (Danson and Burnett 2014), and a weak understanding of the workings of the local reality by central authorities (Quinn et al. 2014) have led the rural entrepreneurial ecosystems to be either ignored, underrepresented or misrepresented by policy makers.

The explanations above converge with findings from studies focusing on how policy makers approach interventions in rural socio-economies, where the biggest node concerns what the valorisation of diversity means at the top levels. In a highly informative article, Saraceno (2013) has demonstrated that EU policymakers prefer to use a logic of fixing disparities to that of addressing differences, and this has diverging spatial implications. Disparity, which in the social sciences is a concept linked to dichotomies and to levelling up inequalities, produces one-size-fits-all, sectoral policies which erase territorial concerns, and only agriculture has a distinctively rural dimension. Once inequality is tackled, there is no purpose for territorial concerns, because policies for rural socio-economies have significance only in so far as they ameliorate a certain gap, belonging to different areas and spheres of ministerial control. Rural policies are then marginal and scattered. On the contrary, a logic of diversity engages with the social, economic, cultural and historical combinations that form the countryside and is an approach which does not require a

definition of what rural is, as each place defines its own priorities. Saraceno states that although the diversity approach is premised on empirical findings corroborating its validity (that is, increasing the chances of local socio-economies), policymakers overwhelmingly rely on a logic of disparity, led by costs and organisational problems and the rise of neoliberal economic discourses within the EU.

Saraceno's conclusion is of critical importance, also outside the European sphere. She reminds that researchers will not *find* a coherent rural policy but will rather have to navigate the territorial dimension in nominally a-territorial policies to *create* a coherent analytical narrative of rural policymaking. However desirable tailored initiatives might effectively be at the local level, the onus of making such policies become the norm requires 'powerful political arguments' (ibid., 436) to overcome the feasibility issues that arise during their implementation, an onus which is unlikely to be borne by states. Hence, what appears to emerge from the literature is that, rather than states being spontaneously moving towards embracing diversity, resistance based on economic calculations mixed to an inability to effectively regulate different needs might co-participate to the state either discarding territorial concerns or seeing them as excessively demanding and little rewarding (or rewarding few).

Moreover, were states to embrace diversity as leading principle, problems might arise. There is a worrying line in the common criticisms to an approach which valorises diversity which relates to the potential harm that might derive from a politics which *de facto* elects before sharing, despite the sympathetic position that one might hold for the well-being of individual socio-economies, their strive for self-help and assertion of local identities. Scholars have dutifully noted signs of increasing inequalities, such as the negative consequences of the devolution of responsibilities from states to localities and individuals when initiatives fail; the creation of winners and losers when local discretion rather than universal entitlement is the guiding principle of redistribution; the strengthening of disparities determined by the initial conditions of places and societies, be it in the form of competition for resources between places or in the form of local elites being able to monopolise resources acquired; or the lack of participation of marginalised groups (Navarro, Woods, and Cejudo 2015; Bosworth et al. 2015). Programmes can also fail completely to address local challenges despite claiming to do so. Navarro-Valverde and colleagues' document analysis of Local Development Strategies (LDSs) in the Andalusian region (2021) revealed that despite the high discursive priority given to ageing and depopulation, there was a substantial absence of specific measures to tackle the phenomena, as the state neglected more remote socio-economies and these were not able to stand for themselves. When places start ageing and depopulating, their capacity to be active, including proposing solutions, is hindered, and if states do not intervene, even substantially, the prospects of these socio-economies might decline further. Valuing the

diversity of rural socio-economies by empowering localities in the name of the concrete needs they have might come at the expense of the connections that are created horizontally among assimilated socio-economies (i.e., the collective of rural socio-economies) when pursuing such efforts.

As evident from the sample literature above (which is, indeed, very vast), the rural environment has been deemed to pose challenges and opportunities for private economic agents, but it does so in a quantitative and not too reflexive fashion. As noted by Massey, 'the "industrial locational decision" is just one moment in a much wider economic, ideological and political field' (1995, 44), not eternal and not coherent at all among firms. How private economic agents relate to the locality touches upon on a variety of factors such as the type of capital involved, the kind of labour companies face, but also on how the pressures put on companies 'are defined and on how they are translated through the wider political and social context', an analysis which 'must be set in the context of broader social processes, both inside and outside the firm itself' (ibid, 15). Nonetheless, this form of generalisations based on incidence capture more effectively policy-makers' minds, because it allows to deliver programmes by simplifying complexity.

Moreover, as Halfacree (1993) noted, these works tend to suffer from the flaw of putting the cart before the horse by describing rather than defining the rural (see also: Hooks, Lobao, and Tickamyer 2016). Deciding what the rural is and then finding patterns might be useful, and nobody wants to deny the fact that knowledge and action come also through approximation and imprecision. However, describing a place as rural or urban because of the incidence of some facts can only produce classifications and empirical categorisations which are unable to give space any particular meaning. As Scott and colleagues state, the 'unhealthy preoccupation with statistical definitions of rural … has led to a whole series of stylised fallacies which fail to capture new patterns and interrelations between rural and urban areas' (2009, 419).

### 1.2.2 Socio-cultural definitions and the discourse on rural entrepreneurship

Socio-cultural definitions of the rural constitute attempts to read society from their geographical location and are highly contentious. In the past, the distinction between rural and urban societies was often based along the misinterpretation of the concepts of *gemeinschaft*, community, and *gesellschaft,* society (Newby 1980, 1983, 1986; Harper 1989; Gilbert 1982), and so what used to describe a set of relationships became equated to a society in place. The rural was *gemeinschaft*, where social relationships were based on 'close human relationships developed through kinship, linked to place through a common habitat, and sharing cooperation and co-ordinated action for a common good', while the urban was *gesellschaft*, with its 'increasing impersonality of ties and

exchange accompanying industrialisation and where common good was achieved through the actions of individuals' (Harper 1989, 162–63).

Socio-cultural works endorsed the view that rural societies were different from urban ones, but similar among themselves, because the type of socio-economic exchanges were supposed to have a fundamentally distinct nature. Not only was there an assumption that 'rural areas could be delineated, at least in part, as being functionally and even causally different from other areas' (Cloke, Heron, and Roche 1990, 13); in the homogenised rural, problems came from the outside, and the interests and values of attachment to property and anti-working-class positions were denied by the unity, social harmony, and place-based cohesion resulting from the immediateness and authenticity of social relations (Newby 1980; Mormont 1980, 1990; Day 1998). The rural was a lifestyle and a way of organising social life and production through 'traditional' relationships, as well as it was a collective form, a social category based on moral values and whose interests were defined within themselves, not against others (Mormont 1990).

Works that propose that rural socio-economies are different from urban ones because of the quality of the social relationships within certain societies in space can still be retrieved in the contemporary literature and the literature on rural entrepreneurship. The rural entrepreneur (or enterprise) is different, or meant to be, from the X entrepreneur, because they have an attachment to place, and their activities are embedded in the social life the rural environment favours. Hence, in some ways, the rural socio-economy too works differently from the urban one.

A highly cited publication by Korsgaard and colleagues (2015), significantly titled 'Rural entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship in the rural – between place and space', might be a good example of socio-cultural definitions applied to the field of entrepreneurship. Based on the distinction between place and space, and depicting the two as end nodes and 'ideal types' of a range, the authors define rural entrepreneurship as involving 'particular engagement with its place and in particular the rurality of the place and the environment', 'an intimate relation between the entrepreneurial activity and the place where it occurs', while entrepreneurship in the rural 'engages with the immediate spatial context as merely a location for its activities, thereby employing a logic of space characterized by profit and mobility', which can 'be relocated without any significant loss of function or identity' and does not involve 'an exchange or relation between the human actors/the venture and the specific rural location' (ibid., 7). Hence, they propose, 'entrepreneurial ventures located in rural locations vary in terms of the extent of rurality insofar as they engage with their rural location' (ibid., 6).

There are a number of reasons why the article, and its depiction of entrepreneurship, raises questions. Some issues are linked to the concept of rural. Firstly, even though the authors are

careful to give an interpretative meaning to rurality based on the engagement of agents, so not to fall into spatial determinism and maybe avoid criticisms attributed to the original socio-cultural thread of works (fully listed in: Newby 1980; see also: Gaddefors and Anderson 2018 for the same arguments applied to rural entrepreneurship)[3], rurality is still related to 'intimate' exchange. Not only have works proven that intimacy is not necessarily conducive to positive relations (Fox-Rogers 2019) and that strong social orientations do not necessarily build up towards common good (Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb 2012), Pahl's (1966, 1965) works proving that community, intimacy and connection between people and places is not a feature of places, but of people and groups of people, still hold relevance. Secondly the utilisation of local resources is made a requirement of the 'real' rural entrepreneur. Korsgaard and colleagues (2015) mention the use of 'innate (natural, cultural, historical, human, social and/or financial) resources of a place' from which 'codified artefacts are created' which re-connect place to space and that are unique as 'no place is made up of the same mix of resources' to advance their argument on the embeddedness of rural entrepreneurs. Obviously, along such lines, one is also left to wonder what the basis for defining urban entrepreneurship would be. There is no intrinsic need nor particular desirability for rural enterprises to make *things*, to exploit the *rural imaginary*, or to give a *local flavour* to entrepreneurial pursuits. Such efforts only appear to create a normative hierarchy of entrepreneurs, companies, SMEs, and even work, and tell little about the role of entrepreneurship for rural socio-economies. Arguments of this sort appear more like yet another way to generalise, based on the search of humans for alternatives to our current socio-economic system, capitalism. But there is no reason why these should be looked after in specific places, rather than in our societies.

The most problematic aspect is, however, how a normative view of the rural espouses a romantic view of entrepreneurship and enterprises. Rural entrepreneurship is treated as good for the local socio-economy *without any specification* by recurring to the refuge that ideal types are heuristics devices. The assumption that entrepreneurship, including 'rural entrepreneurship', is good *in general* is untenable (Shane 2009; Bjørnskov and Foss 2013; Stenholm, Acs, and Wuebker 2013). This is hardly a criticism restricted to the specific article, and more a general reflection on the entrepreneurship literature. Already Baumol, inspired by the classical political economy literature and especially Schumpeter and Marx, noted that entrepreneurship can be productive,

[3] The list of problems includes problems of spatial determinism, the reification of the rural, the search for Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in rural and urban localities, the search for community in the rural and the rural idyll, and the differences which, while existing when urban and rural are treated as empirical categories, stop being meaningful when having to find causality.

unproductive and destructive (1990), depending on where entrepreneurialism is allocated, which would, in turn, relate to the set of social, economic, and cultural incentives and disincentives at any given time and location, such as the political environment (Bennett, Boudreaux, and Nikolaev 2022) or to the presence of welfare states (Henrekson 2005).

The function of entrepreneurship or enterprises or productive economic agents depends not only on their individual motivations, but also on a social demand as well as a political one. It is not sufficient to state that private economic agents 'contribute' to (rural) resilience by creating employment, delivering products and services, engaging with the community, promoting places, sponsoring events and so forth (Steiner and Atterton 2015). These are the actions that can be taken, but they are aimless if not driven by a societal problem. Efforts can be taken to try to relate how the practice and beliefs of the entrepreneurs respond to the challenges their localities face and what means they have to do so. This implies understanding the context in which they operate and their motivations, as well as the set of beliefs they uphold. But it also implies that the role of companies is circumscribed by the political economy.

Entrepreneurship, in its wider connotation, can be used as a discursive tool from political entourages and powerful interests to disengage from responsibilities they used to hold. The increasing importance of the discourse of entrepreneurship, mostly unexplored outside the critical entrepreneurship literature (Verduyn, Dey, and Tedmanson 2017), and its role as a neoliberal ideology has been connected to the retrenchment of the state and the individualisation of the social burden (Carmo et al. 2021; Ahl and Marlow 2019). Entrepreneurship has been depicted as 'a strategy of capitalism, whose discourse places the entrepreneur as an agent of economic growth and social change', and whereby 'the responsibility for ensuring dignified survival conditions passes from the political and social sphere to the individual level' (Carmo et al. 2021, 22–23). It has also been identified as a class-based and gender-based activity, valorised when entrepreneurs 'are producers (not reproducers) of economic vitality' (Gill 2012, 62).

Acknowledging the discursive element of entrepreneurship is even more important considering that in the last two decades, rural development policy in advanced, high-income capitalist countries has taken a neoliberal turn, distinguished by an emphasis on regional competitiveness, local entrepreneurialism, and devolution of key responsibilities for economic planning and development (Young 2016). When entrepreneurship or the powers of individual behaviours are treated acritically, extrapolated from the wider context in which they take place, always held equally meaningful and playing the same role, what happens is that the guard is lowered on what entrepreneurship is replacing. This might actually *go against* rural socio-economies: it usually means less schools, less hospitals, less services. It makes the small smaller.

Not only is the spatial, socio and economic, cultural context of entrepreneurial activity important because of how it shapes human activities, but the contingent state of a society is equally important because it helps defining priorities and how entrepreneurial pursuits might, or might not, help address *specific* problems and their local manifestations and shape the rural through practice. Changes in the political economy, led *in primis* by the state, alter the meaning of entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial behaviour. For instance, if rural localities suffer from the lack of transportation, entrepreneurs might be responsive and set shuttle buses for workers; they might go beyond that, and extend it to students at school times, and they might do so by coordinating with other companies or the local government. They might believe transportation is none of their problems, perceive it as the duty of the state, and question why it does not provide such services. And the answer might be that the state does not see that as a priority for rural areas; that the area was excluded from initiatives because it was not meeting certain criteria; that the state relies on or promotes concepts of community to conceal its lack of engagement; or that the state does not see rural areas as worthy of further investments.

There are of course other possible scenarios, but the message here is there are *directions* and there is a matter of *quality* which give entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs, in their *contexts*, significance. Entrepreneurship is one of the mechanisms to distribute wealth and well-being to the locality, but localities themselves are not subject to one determining force. The same concept of rural governance, and the empowerment of community, implies that a variety of actors and organisations, including the state, have a say in rural resilience (Bock 2019). Some works on rural entrepreneurship are so focused on making the case for its peculiarity that they forget that the localities are embedded in complex systems which are hardly mono-dimensional. Socio-cultural definitions of the rural might thus hide how the wider context is essential in the formation of the future of these societies.

### 1.2.3 Localities: socio-economic processes in rural spaces, from agriculture and beyond

If works utilising socio-cultural definitions tend to be a-historical and a-contextual in so far that space is uniquely defined within the locality, generalising in normative ways, the view of the rural as a locality and as the evolution of agrarian societies offers different ways to interrogate the rural, ontologically and epistemologically.

These approaches are associated with Marxist-inspired political economy studies of the 1970s-1980s (Wang and Liu 2014; Sheppard 2011; Holgersen 2020; Walton 1993; Buttel and McMichael 1988), and have played a critical role in advancing theoretical engagement of the rural literature. Nonetheless, they were largely dismissed after the emergence of the vastly influential cultural

turn (Cloke 1997; Cloke 2006; Woods 2011a; Little 1999) and the relational turn (Woods 2007; Heley and Jones 2012). Among the factors contributing to the silence of political economy works, it is possible to cite a certain uneasiness that the discipline would endanger the meaningfulness of the rural by reducing spatial variations to 'elements of the differentiation of functions and activities at the national and international level' (Cloke and Goodwin 1992, 321; Woods 2009b), the uptake of the notion of the rural as a social construction influenced by Mormont's works (1990, 1980), and a shift in the socio-political environment which hit the Marxist ideology (Buttel 2001; Swyngedouw 2008) and therefore impacted the main channel feeding the rural conceptual literature. The political economy literature of the 1990s focused on globalisation, so that the previous connections with the rural were largely put aside as insignificant. Since then, rural scholars have embraced a more generous understanding of the field of political economy (Bakker 2015), partially losing the emphasis on what concerns the collective and the individual and on the 'heterogeneity of interests that is the basis of the field of political economy' (Drazen 2000, p.10).

Nonetheless, political economic approaches to the rural point at the core problems of the rural literature. The paradox authors confronted was that, despite conspicuous empirical research, there was not much to be learnt about the rural beyond the specific circumstances of each study (Woods 2011b). If the key point of debate was the need for abstraction and reasonable generalisation in rural research which would allow it to overcome its (a)theoretical *impasse* and empirical nature, a main element under examination rotated around the claim that the rural was not a sociological category. What they were referring to was the inability of previous rural theories to explain what was happening in the societies that were objects of their interest (Newby 1980; Mooney 1987; on sociological categories, see: Granter 2016) and make them specifically significant by referring to their rurality (Gilbert 1982). Because by that time rural socio-economies had been integrated in the capitalist system, they presented much of the same problematics as other areas, and hence alternative theories needed to be used. The solutions provided to deal with the concept of the rural were then two: on the one side, to espouse the study of agriculture and, on the other to discard the utility of the concept altogether.

#### *1.2.3.1 Agriculture as the distinguishing mark of the rural*

At the core of the rural in political economy approaches is the relationship between capitalism and agriculture, heavily influenced by the importation of Marxist theories and the classical literature in rural studies (Buttel 2001; Constance 2015). The leading research agenda, known as New Rural Sociology or the New Political Economy of Agriculture (Newby 1980, see also: 1983, 1986; Buttel and Newby 1980), was born in a period of agricultural crisis and the steep decline

of family farms in the US (Newby and Buttel 1980; Newby 1983; Buttel 2001), when farms contended with industry in the production of food, and rural industrialisation, the decentralisation of industrial production, and alternative commercial uses of rural spaces had already started to emerge (Bonanno 2017; Friedland 1982, 2002).

Agriculture became established as the decisive conceptual focus for the study of the development of rural socio-economies in consideration of the different degree of capitalist penetration in rural economies and the reorganisation of societies along the resources provided by the exploitation of land for subsistence and commodities. Sharing its premises with the Marxist urban sociology literature, the rural was firstly seen as 'one manifestation of the overall development of (capitalist) society', whereby:

> the 'spatial form' of society is …reducible to the nature of land use moulded by market and/or planned economic factors. The terms 'rural' and 'urban' therefore initially represented a division of labour between agriculture and manufacturing industry, the latter making a highly intensive use of space while agriculture used, and to a large extent still uses, space (land) in a very extensive manner. […] it might therefore be possible to suggest that the division of society into 'rural' and 'urban' areas is simply the spatial expression of the division of labour. However, it would be quite mistaken to suggest such a mechanistic economic determinism, since this spatial form is institutionalised in socio-legal rights of property ownership which, in many respects, shape and mould the allocative process (Newby 1980, 34-5. Emphasis added).

Hence, *if* any significance was to be found in the specificity of the rural other than as an empirical category, a specific structure with some degree of explanatory power, this was given by the new forms created by the interplays between agricultural production, property relations and the rural class structure. Newby (1980) stressed that this could be pursued by concentrating on the landholding structure and property rights as the possible defining principle of the stratification system of rural societies (who owns what and under which conditions land is used). So, whereas in urban stratification occupational position was deemed to prevail, in rural societies the variety of property systems regulating land ensured different patterns of class relations, and the latter in turn determined 'the sharpness of differences of legal privileges and style of life' and shaped 'the distribution of technical culture and political activity' (Stinchcombe 1961, 165; cf. Goss, Rodefeld, and Buttel 1980).

The theoretical repertoire tying together agriculture and the rural was retraced to Marxist works dealing with the so-called agrarian question (Newby 1980; Marsden 1988; Woods 2011b) and emphasising the exceptionality and vexed nature of agriculture for the development of capitalism (Bernstein 1996, 2006; Byres 1986)[4]. In particular, attention was given to how land reform and the property right system could shape the relationship between individuals, the state and the economic system, creating complex class structures (e.g., Friedmann 1980; Mooney 1983; Newby

[4] On perspectives on agrarian Marxism and the agrarian question, see: Levien, Watts, and Hairong (2018) and Akram-Lodhi and Kay (2012).

1979). Economically, the debate was centred on the 'technicalities' of agriculture (Byres 1986; Lefebvre 2016; Elden and Morton 2016), and mostly dealt through the theory of ground rent[5] . Agriculture has been deemed different from other sectors, as the particularities of land as a *means* of production in agriculture, its being both a natural and property monopoly, impose boundaries on the processes of accumulation and centralisation which were not equally present in industry (Newby and Buttel 1980)[6]. Finally, from a historical perspective, the wider role of agriculture for overall national development was a major subject of investigation (Byres 1986; Kohl, Dobeson, and Brandl 2017; Kay 2002; Chang 2009; Grinberg and Starosta 2009). This is also a debate that survives in the Political Economy of Agri-Food[7], the successor of the New Rural Sociology.

The New Rural Sociology portrayed agriculture as *the* distinguishing characteristic of the rural, the only sensitive alternative to otherwise unequivocally empirical categorisations. Some dynamics manifest(ed) exclusively in the rural because of its 'monopoly' in (agricultural) land. The *history* of agriculture in the making of local, national, and global dynamics forms the starting point to understand the development of rural socio-economies, and their relation to the wider political economy. On the one hand, these works importantly remind that institutions regulating rural socio-economies were born for different reasons, some of which are political. On the other hand, specific constraints in agricultural production have not lost significance and help capture the reasons for the nuances of agricultural production. For instance, the disjuncture of production and labour time, technologies and strategies granting competitiveness to the family farm (Marsden et al. 1989), and forms of self-exploitation (Kenney et al. 1989) have been listed as reasons for the survival of the family farm facing capitalistic encroachment, while other scholars

[5] The theory of ground rent inquires about how rent can be explained in terms of the Marxist value system (Ramirez 2009), and the conundrum that 'non-produced resources have prices, even though they have no value' as they are not created through human labour (Basu 2018, 2). Recent works have evaluated its importance and applicability in the mining, tourism, housing, fishing and knowledge-production industries (Campling and Havice 2014; Basu 2018; Rotta and Teixeira 2019).

[6] In a very simplified explanation, the major differences between agriculture and industry are that land requirements in agricultural production cannot be restricted as in industry, and that different lands might provide *potentially* different gains by the intrinsic qualities of their soil and location (natural monopoly). Industrial products, on the contrary, do not change in quantity and quality based on where the production site is located[6]. Under these conditions, ownership, a non-market institution, was posited to tip the balance of who got to appropriate the returns from agriculture. As a property monopoly, the gains from agricultural production can be distributed (or appropriated) among landowners, capitalist farmers, and landless agricultural workers depending on who owned the land and under which agreements, the intervention of the state, and the conditions of the market (Lobao and Meyer 2004), giving rise to different social stratifications.

[7] On food regimes, see: McMichael (2016, 2009), Friedmann (2016), Campbell (2009), Bernstein (2016) Friedmann and McMichael (1989), Araghi (2010), Robbins (2015), Wang (2017). On agricultural commodity chains, see: Hughes and Reimer (2004), Collins (2005), Friedland (2001), Dixon (1999), Page (1997), and Bonanno (2017). On the regulation of agri-food, see: Kenney et al. (1989), Sauer (1990), Drummond et al. (2000). On and actor-network studies, please refer to Law (1992), Watts and Scales (2015), Busch and Juska (1997), Heron et al. (2001), and Murdoch (2000). On political ecology approaches, see: Buttel (2001), Roche (2002), Campbell and Dixon (2009), Watts and Scales (2015).

have documented the way that capitalism penetrates rural areas by besieging all those relationships surrounding farming operations (Mooney 1982), or establishing monopolies over farm inputs, processing, and marketing (Goss, Rodefeld, and Buttel 1980).

Although the New Rural Sociology agenda did not survive the 1980s, agriculture continues to be a hot topic in the rural-agriculture debate even today, scholarly, politically, and publicly. The intertwining between academia, agricultural corporate interests and research plays a part in explaining why scholars are so fascinated with agriculture to the point of obscuring the rural (Runge 2006; Ashwood and Bell 2016; Skees 1992; Stanton 1991; Castle 2000), regardless of the harm it brings upon rural vitality by biasing policy (Ashwood 2018). The agrarian political economy agenda has constituted a double-edged sword that successfully counteracted uncritical rural sociology but effectively made of agriculture '*the* mechanism to explain rural loss' or '*the* problem and *the* solution for the rural', inadvertently incentivising a productivist view of the rural as 'a narrowly economic phenomenon, a space of production and not much else' (Ashwood and Bell 2016, n.a., emphasis in original). The materiality of agriculture, the seemingly impermanence of land and fields which renders agriculture apparently immobile, and therefore a pertinent category, allows agriculture to exert its power over rural socio-economies, which are perceived as immaterial, passive and dying, and its people, always changing and therefore unintelligible (Ashwood and Bell 2016; see also: Bell 2007; Bell, Lloyd, and Vatovec 2010). And, indeed, when studying rural entrepreneurship, the main targets are agricultural businesses, and considerable problems might be found when searching for literature on other sectors. The valorisation of people passes through the resources of the rural — tourism, the environment, food, traditions and so forth, something of great disappointment for those who believe human creativity takes all forms, shapes and inspirations.

At the politico-institutional level, agriculture is significant because it has long represented the organised side of the rural — collectively. This has strongly been linked to state policies. Lobao (2004) has found three forms of farm power in the US. Economic power derives from the agribusiness system, which transfers the burden of low prices paid to contracting farmers to the state in the form of subsidies or other support. Political influence is derived by the disproportional weight of rural electoral constituencies, an unusually bipartisan support. Symbolic prestige relates to the ancient charm of farming, with popular support for the general population. Ashwood (2018) shares radical opinions against the state rural agenda, which he considers as the systematic exploitation of rural places. States are not, for Ashwood, agents of unilateral good, but rather regulators of the market society *and* of its deleterious consequences, calling for the acknowledgement that the 'state has agency', and it is not using it towards rural well-being (2018, 730). Indeed, agriculture still exerts a wide influence over rural affairs.

Other scholars in the political economy thread, however, did take the challenge to describe the rural on totally different grounds, in recognition of the fact that agriculture today runs on the lower digits of employment in high-income countries, and therefore diversification has taken place. This literature adopted a totally different perspective on the rural, as seen below.

#### *1.2.3.2 Beyond agriculture*

If de facto identifying the rural with the presence of agriculture was a first solution to justify the study of the rural as a proper field of study or characterise rural socio-economies, the second solution to deal with the rural was to discard the concept altogether. This was hardly a new call, as Dymitrow and Brauer (2018)'s table on 100 years of rural scholars questioning the concept shows (Table 5). A seminal article by the provoking title 'Let's do away with rural' by Hoggart goes to the core of the criticisms, stating that 'the designation "rural", no matter how defined, does not provide an appropriate abstraction' (1990, 246).

There are three core dimensions taken in consideration to support the claim that rural and urban differentiations are not reasonable in today's world: capital accumulation, state, and civil society. According to Hoggart (1990), the differences between rural areas and the similarities between urban and rural can be substantial among all the dimensions. Regarding capital accumulation, Hoggart posits that a degree of peculiarity in rural areas is the *disproportionate* representation of competitive sectors in its employment structure. Agriculture, like tourism and retailing, is a competitive sector, where businesses need to compete in the market economy and are price-takers, contrary to monopoly sectors, such as electronics, where companies may better control the prices at which they sell. Agriculture is also a competitive sector of a different type in terms of its capacity to organise and win protection from the state, but, as the degree of protection varies among products, among rural localities there will be differences, too. Regarding the state, the authors argue that there is no rural component to it, and that size is more critical than rurality to understand service provision, while population change and economic growth are central to distinguish policies also in cities. As to civil society, social cleavages depend on particular social groups, rather than places. In short, the rural for Hoggart is an empirical category with little theoretical significance.

So, how should the rural be approached? Mostly, like any other place, because there is no necessity to have a particular 'rural' analysis, but rather localities are 'laboratories' for the study of important social issues (Newby 1986). The term 'locality' indicates 'the physical setting of institutions within which certain social practices are contained. A locality is a place where there is a distinctive institutional mix giving rise to an identifiable local economy and culture' (Murdoch and Pratt 1993, 420). What is important is the X factor(s) which accounts for the uneven

development of societies as it unfolds through space. As Hooks and colleagues emphasise, '[analysts] are less interested in the intrinsic quality of a given place and more interested in how social processes work out across them'(2007, 11), with rural studies well-placed to contribute to knowledge in the social sciences by filling the gap of studies at the regional and sub-national level (Hooks, Lobao, and Tickamyer 2016).

*Table 5: 100 years of critique of 'rural' and 'urban': longevity*

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| **1917** | 'The suggestion that there is some scientific justification for employing the title rural may prove entertaining' (Gillette 1917, 184). |
| **1918** | 'Rural and urban are vague and contradictory and their use should be discontinued for scientific work' (Galpin, Campbell, and Vogt 1918; paraphrased by Gilbert 1982, 611–612). |
| **1924** | 'The cardinal question may also be raised as to the continued legitimacy of the terms and categories "urban" and "rural" […]. Where the line should be drawn for urban and rural is very uncertain, and even whether it is really worth while [sic] drawing it at all […], is an open question' (Bailey 1924, 162, 164). |
| **1929** | '[There must be concern for the] "mechanisms and effects of urbanization and ruralization upon a population". [Any other […] makes the specializations redundant]' (Zimmerman 1929; paraphrased by Gilbert 1982, 612). |
| **1958** | '[T]he urban-rural distinction is not one of social networks or of institutional profiles but of individual outlook' (Stewart Jr 1958, 158). |
| **1960** | 'The use of the terms "rural" and "urban" in current publications reveals a gross lack of agreement concerning their referents' (Dewey 1960, 60). |
| **1965** | '[I]f one is willing to accept "rural" as a fuzzy, descriptive designation, the matter becomes relatively unimportant' (Bealer, Willits, and Kuvlesky 1965, 257). |
| **1966** | '[T]he terms rural and urban are more remarkable for their ability to confuse than for their power to illuminate' (Pahl 1966, 299). |
| **1972** | 'There is no rural and there is no rural economy. It is merely our analytical distinction, our rhetorical device. Unfortunately we tend to be the victims of our own terminological duplicity' (Copp 1972, 159). |
| **1973** | '[The theoretical crisis of rurality lies in the] basic insufficiency of the sociological concepts with which rural phenomena have been apprehended' (Galjart 1973, 254–255). |
| **1977** | 'The simple fact is that rural people, rural communities, and rural conditions are so diverse that we can find evidence to support nearly any characterization' (Sher 1977, 1). |
| **1978** | '"[Pursuing] perspectives which largely ignore the actor's view of the world […] has led to a form of theoretical-empirical myopia influencing what is known and can be known about […] the concept "rural"' (Falk and Pinhey 1978, 547). |
| **1982** | 'What is rural … again?' (Gilbert 1982, 611). |
| **1986** | 'There is now, surely, a general awareness that what constitutes "rural" is wholly a matter of convenience and that arid abstract definitional exercises are of little utility' (Newby 1986, 209). |
| **1990** | '[T]he designation "rural", no matter how defined, does not provide an appropriate abstraction; […] [if] we cannot agree what "rural" is, this does not give us carte blanche to rely on "convenient" definitions of it' (Hoggart 1990, 245–246). |
| **1993** | 'The literature on urban studies seems to have reached something of an impasse. […] We are left with recycled critiques, endlessly circulating the same messages about modernity and postmodernity. The city has become a dead letter zone' (Thrift 1993, 229). |
| **2005** | '[T]he rural/urban divide has been kept alive by a binary model of thinking, peddling ideas of separation, difference and even opposition […]. In practice, however, the divide has become blurred in all kinds of ways' (Cloke and Johnston 2005, 11). |
| **2006** | '[T]he distinction between rural and urban spaces is becoming irrelevant – or at least less relevant – to the extent that concepts such as "the urban" and "the rural" are no longer useful for making sense of societies characterised by high levels of geographic and social mobility' (Hubbard 2006, 2). |
| **2006** | 'Despite strong warnings to the contrary […], these loose concepts continue to underpin aspects of rural studies […]. Sadly, empirical work conducted on this basis is often flawed' (Cloke 2006, 20). |
| **2009** | '[C]ontinued belief in any town versus countryside divide may even be seen as ideological, both denying and confusing human understanding of the spatiality of contemporary capitalism' (Halfacree 2009, 450). |

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| **20 11** | 'Rural versus urban – a necessary divide? […] Do we need this spatial separation […], or is the divide used to underpin the struggle to constitute the superior and uphold a prevailing norm?' (Stenbacka 2011, 243). |
| **2011** | 'The varied functions and meanings […] have made the rural into an ambiguous and complex concept. The rural is a messy and slippery idea that eludes easy definition and demarcation' (Woods 2011, 1). |
| **2013** | '[T]rying conclusively to define rurality materially runs the risk of perpetuating a "chaotic conception" […] of space that is most unlikely to ground a robust rural structured coherence' (Somerville, Halfacree, and Bosworth 2013, 282). |
| **2013** | '[T]he urban appears to have acquired an unprecedented strategic significance for an extraordinarily broad array of institutions, organizations, researchers, actors, and activists, [while] its definitional contours have become unmanageably slippery. The apparent ubiquity of the contemporary urban condition makes it now seem impossible to pin down' (Brenner 2013, 91). |
| **2016** | '"[R]ural" and "urban" […] have come to a point in their conceptual development at which they can signify almost anything […], and this span widens with an ever greater speed without raising considerable intellectual doubts' (Dymitrow and Stenseke 2016, 2). |
| **2017** | '[I]nstead of trying to determine what the "real" city is […], today it is more important to look into how the city and the urban are given meaning in different contexts, and how they are changed and planned for' (Tunström and Smas 2017, 145–146). |

Table Source: Dymitrow and Brauer (2018, 197)

Works took pains to analyse the multiple facets of such uneven development. Some works, explicitly utilising the regulationist approach[8], focused on the restructuring of the economy after the decrease of the agricultural sector and the diversification of socio-economies towards manufacturing and the service sector, while other works, mostly provided as references to indicate examples on the topic, go deeper into studying a specific phenomenon through multiple lower level theories or concepts. The way the restructuring of local economies takes place is however highly variable, as the 'spatial unevenness of productive relations coalesces with the local particularities of other dimensions of the social structure to generate characteristic forms of political expression in such communities' (Rees 1985, cited in: Newby 1986, 214). Nonetheless, some trends have been drafted concerning the directions that rural economies appear to have taken. New structured coherences have been found to be emerging at the local level concerning the economy, society, and the relationship with government (Cloke and Goodwin 1992, passim; see also: Hoggart and Paniagua 2001, who propose capitalist market relationships, state processes, and civil society as relevant dimensions).

[8] Regulation Theory challenges Marx's assumption on the inevitable demise of capitalism and advances that the latter can survive the antagonism of class struggle and the inherent crises it generates through its capacity to create medium term, provisional balances (Aglietta 1998). This was witnessed historically during the Fordist regime post World War II, when improving labour's standards of living and sustained accumulation coexisted. As Peck and Tickell (1992) explained, so-called regimes of accumulation are phases where there is co-stabilisation in the medium term of two core elements: the accumulation system (the economic mode of economic regulation) and the social mode of regulation (the social mode of economic regulation). The accumulation system is the dominant mode of economic growth and distribution (ibid.), whereas a mode of regulation is 'a set of mediations which ensure that the distortions created by the accumulation of capital are kept within limits which are compatible with social cohesion within each nation'(Aglietta 1998, 44). These regimes intrinsically possess the germs of crisis, which push them into transitional periods of restructuring and might lead to the formation of a new regime of accumulation.

The first dimension authors looked at was changes related to the economic system. The commodification of rural areas (Rønningen 2016; Rønningen and Flemsœter 2016; Malin and DeMaster 2016), technology-led exploitation of labour and rural places (e.g., processing of air tickets, call centres, but also homeworking and similar), rural industrialisation (Kelly 2020; Lowe et al. 1993), the exploitation of rural marginality for politically-sensitive and unpleasant industries and activities (Ashwood and MacTavish 2016), and the structural adjustment of agriculture have all been found to be significant phenomena unravelling in the countryside and shaping its future (Cloke and Goodwin 1992). Some authors also attempted to give indicative models to understand rural socio-economies. Marini and Mooney (2006) have proposed typologies of rural economies based on Marsden's ideal types for rural social relations and political governance[9]. They divided types of rural economies into rent-seeking economies, where resources are mainly based on agriculture and the extractive industry, dependent economies, where income is primarily derived from public or private external sources, and entrepreneurial economies, which obtain income from the valorisation of local resources. As it is often the case with ideal models, however, these are tools which serve better comparative works, with the risks of fitting in cases.

The second dimension of rural restructuring concerns society. The rural space today is seen as high fluid and mobile, characterised by in- and out-migration (Farrell, Mahon, and McDonagh 2012; Cloke and Goodwin 1992). Processes such as people-led in-migration might however bring or reinforce conflicts in rural areas, as newcomers pushed by ideas of rural idyll or by certain living standards that cannot be attained in the city bring with themselves different interests from those which might have governed rural societies previously. Old and new elites might fight for power, although a communion of interests makes it so that new and old landed classes will impose their vision of rurality over commoners' concerns, such as housing (Somerville 2013). The rural imaginary too will be changed, according to new societal configurations.

The third dimension of rural restructuring regards the political environment. The most relevant feature of this thread of works in terms of the research is how the state takes a particular importance as a major driver of transformation in rural localities (Day, Rees, and Murdoch 1989)[10]. According to Cloke and Little (1990), the study of state and rural matters had been

[9] Marsden had identified four types of countryside, preserved, contested, paternalistic and clientelistic (see: Marini and Mooney 2006).

[10] The other literature which will not be seen in the literature review which considers the state in rural development is that concerning the debate between exogenous, endogenous and neo-endogenous development (Kilkenny and Partridge 2009; Kilkenny 2010; Henderson 2002; Torre and Wallet 2015)(Kilkenny and Partridge 2009; Kilkenny 2010; Henderson 2002). Although these are extremely valid works raising important and uncomfortable questions about the rural, most of the criticisms advanced in the critical political economy literature would apply to these works.

characterised by two features. Firstly, a 'blinkered rationality' of state action leads towards policy evaluation as a test of the practical objectives of a certain policy intervention, tacitly accepting policies at face value, as if state policy objectives reflect the real underlying roles and functions of the state, systematically downplaying the context in which policy is formulated, and attributing policy problems to faulty implementation. Secondly and relatedly is the belief that such evaluations grant political neutrality, as it was seen that rural scholars have often been dependent on state grants for their research. Works on rural restructuring restored state intervention, and the way it acts upon territories, as a complex issue which has deeply influenced rural socio-economies as they might be known today. Policy interventions help the reproduction or the new production of social and economic relationships. Truly, the state is not considered as an actor or an agent, but through its institutions, through the government, through its monopolies on agendas, it does affect territories unevenly.

In good parts of the literature, the state often appears in the background of works or in relation to local governments, which intermediate the needs and interests from the bottom and from the top (e.g., Pickvance 1990). There are multiple aspects to this relation. For instance, Cloke and Goodwin (1992) have remarked on the increasing decoupling of interests between different tiers of government. Emerging social relations in the countryside pressure local governments to revise their main objectives, trying to calibrate the new local demands for land use (e.g., housing demands versus environmental and aesthetical conservation of the countryside) and those from the central state and national planning agencies, which respond to wider inputs from capital (Scott et al. 2009). The central state also promotes specific types of rural development based on 'bottom-up', market-led development, where state agencies organise and promote entrepreneurial cultures rather than sustain regions, or push community-led development (Bock 2019; Young 2016), hence bypassing issues of needs in various territories. Discourses surrounding the rural have also been found to be biased towards economic rationales at the expense of more democratic ideals (Holdo 2020), and direct state intervention, dependent on how boundaries for policy are delineated and hence a discriminator for the relevance of state intervention at the territorial level, might leave little space to localities to decide the direction of investment (Bock 2019).

Changes in the political philosophy of the state have also been important. Privatisation, deregulation, and the drift towards state disengagement are reconfiguring the social contract sanctioned in the welfare state, while devolution and decentralisation decrease the power and financial independence of local governments, under the new, diversified neoliberal agenda (Tonts and Horsley 2019). New industrial regulation, the priorities of certain class fractions or industries and the reparatory attempts of developmental control planning (Gallent and Gkartzios 2019;

Gunnoe 2014; Fox-Rogers 2019) all decrease the coherence of rural areas (Cloke and Goodwin 1992). All these factors contribute, in short, to create a highly differentiated rural, where the role of the state influences the unevenness of places.

On the other hand, other works have put the state at the centre of the debate, looking at how the allocation of policies and resources from the state has shaped the rural. For instance, Drummond and colleagues (2000) argued that the British (and European) state(s) is pursuing a failed policy by attaching social and environmental aims to rural policy through established farming structures in the belief that these are keys to attain these goals. Not only rural socio-economies are dependent on a variety of sectors, but dragging this policy agenda will not assist in managing the agricultural crisis to come. Another mature work by Day and colleagues (1989) looks historically at the transformation of rural Wales through three phases of capitalist development, the agrarian economy (before the 19th Century), the modernisation of agriculture (until the 1950s), and the diversification of economic activities (1950s-1970s), to argue, among others, not only that state intervention participated in diversifying the Welsh countryside, but also that, in the process, long-established features of the agrarian socio-economy such as its pluriactivity (today's 'diversification' agenda), were 'suppressed from prevailing accounts of "truly rural" situations' (ibid., 232). Hence, they show how the state might effectively dominate the variety of forms the rural takes by circumscribing rural problems around a policy area and by proposing certain 'solutions'. Policies proposed 'are an instance of state intervention whose objectives are not specified formally in spatial terms, but whose effects are clearly differentiated by area […]' with places where agriculture has a production advantage benefitting substantially from state policies, while in less advantaged areas policies work to undercut 'the avowed aim of post-war policy, … to maintain a minimum population level and conserve the countryside' (ibid 235). This snowballed into different attempts in rural areas to find ways to cope with agricultural decline, such as industrial policies based on attracting non-local companies. And, in turn, the search promoted certain types of work practices in certain areas. Despite being disregarded by much of the rural literature, the state has the potential to influence rural socio-economies, but how it does might be dependent in good part on how it decides to define the rural and how it decides to intervene.

Looking at the rural as a locality or a laboratory means endorsing that the concept of the rural as a primary explanatory force is itself less important than the observation of how various processes, whose nature is heterogeneous, unravel within a locality. The relevance of the rural is to be inductively investigated along with that of other processes recognised in the literature as affecting the development of certain problems. The rural as a locality allows an open perspective to geographically bounded societal problems which does not assume the rural to have specific

characteristics in contemporary societies, or even specific sets of problems, but rather to display configurations of wider problems as they relate to each localities' features. The findings cannot be generalised, but the importance of the mechanisms in action stands.

Hence, beyond the established set of institutions that make up the conventional definition of the rural within the national territory, such as its position in the governance structure, the boundaries of electoral representation, and all the standards used to categorise the rural up to the very detail, the spatial system becomes one of the systems that co-constitute rural socio-economies, thus turning into a question or a variable. But most importantly, the variety of activities taking place in the constitution of rural economies is embraced (Lowe et al. 1993). What has made the rural is relevant, and new uses and meanings of land arise with changes in society or as the state leaves a mark on localities, but contemporary societal problems are starting points to study these localities as cases of wider instances.

As such, the view of the rural as a locality is the view that influenced the way that the *sample* (and part of the case) has been designed – the belief, in short, that socio-economies are too diverse to be grouped together simply by reason of their rurality. Nonetheless, as it was explained, the fact that rural socio-economies are diversified does not mean that this is how they are seen by those who have the power to make them. The literature that most emphasised the interpretative element of the rural and the importance of associations is the literature that sees the rural as a social representation.

### 1.2.4 The rural as a social representation: an interlude

Works on localities or on the political economy of agriculture have not been well-received by all the rural academia. A very lively dialogue is that between political economists and authors in the so-called cultural turn, reflecting well-known paradigm battles in the social sciences. Although with huge variations from work to work, the view of the rural as a locality has been criticised by authors of the latter trend for largely dismissing, although often acknowledging, the power of the concept of the rural as a social representation. Social representations are:

> organizational mental constructs which guide us towards what is 'visible' and must be responded to, relate appearance and reality, and even define reality itself. The world is organized, understood and mediated through these basic cognitive units. Social representations consist of both concrete images and abstract concepts organized around 'figurative nuclei' which are 'a complex of images that visibly reproduce . . . a complex of ideas' ([Moscovici 1984], p. 38). Therefore, whilst they are partly a description of the physical material world, social representations are irreducible to it. They are both iconic and symbolic (Halfacree 1993, 29).

According to Murdoch and Pratt (1993), the restructuring approach and political economic approaches to the rural had three main downsides. Firstly, the links to Marxist analytical lenses,

capitalist production relationships and the search for a materialist countryside directed works towards general level of analyses. The works from the section above rely, as a matter of fact, almost uniquely on few types of sources, usually a mix of policy and governmental documents, surveys, and (descriptive) statistics, as if restructuring can only be observed through already 'digested' materials rather than by looking at agents of change. The political economy of agriculture is even more heavily biased towards structural analyses, which do leave a strong impression that whenever you turn, capitalism is there. Everything is understood through capitalism. In this view, processes overwhelm agents. Secondly, the focus on class came at the expense of other sets of social relationships, such as gender or ethnicity, which indeed holds true for the political economy of agriculture literature, but is less pronounced in the restructuring thread of works. Some authors, such as Massey (1995), showed a great sensitivity to how industrial patterns and the division of labour interact with gender. Thirdly, the problem was still how to grasp the general while appreciating the specific, and, truly so, locality studies might rely on vague notions of space, such as regions (although, again, this is a case by case issue). These criticisms are all valid and reasonable. There is, in political economic approaches to the rural, a certain tendency to see structure at the expense of individual behaviour, with change only understood as taking place in wider time spans, rather than co-created through the decisions of the actors in the socio-economy. Individuals, companies, organisations do not possess the insight of time, because it is broken, fallacious, interpreted. And it appears almost as if they do not have the capacity for change.

Hence, alternatives were needed. As part of the postmodernist strain of social constructionism in rural studies, Murdoch and Pratt also 'dismissed' the rural, but this time not because of the uselessness of the rural as a sociological category compared to other sociological categories, but because all universal concepts, including urban and rural, are the result of the modernist tendency to look for order, to classify and subject individual behaviour to totalising categories meant to dominate the human: 'the construction of these discourses must be seen as the practice of power' (ibid. 416). There is no rural, but rather, 'rurals'. Investigations would explore how the rurals and rurality are constructed, a fact on which authors also within the milder positions about the social world largely agree. The rural is 'a category of thought … constructed at a time when peasant societies were being integrated into society as a whole'(Mormont 1990s, n.a.), carrying the weight of history and the opposition between city and countryside, but practised through the everyday life. How people and entities make sense of the rural matters for how they relate to it.

Mindful of the simplifications, works on the rural as a social representation often tended to analyse discourse and did so by looking at language and how individuals use and create associations with terms, often showing conflicts among their value systems and beliefs.

Halfacree's (1995) inquiry of rurality revealed how the idea of rural idyll, while identified by most residents in the parishes under study, was not treated unproblematically or fully accepted, but critically reflected upon. Nonetheless, rurality was still defined in opposition to an (equally represented) urban life (see also: Bonomo et al. 2017). They also opened rural space to a variety of actors and agents underrepresented in the literature, such as children (Philo 1992) or nature (Whatmore 1990), or by looking at how representations of rurality can be exploited for private gains, especially in those sectors which focus on imaginaries and the search for experience, such as tourism (Lai, Morrison-Saunders, and Grimstad 2017).

Exactly because of their emphasis on language and subjectivity, part of the works on the rural as a social representation might be looked at with a certain suspicion by political economists. Cloke (1997) highlighted that the risk of the fascination for theorising *difference* and *signification* was to trade away a 'politics of *conviction* in favour of a politics of *identity*' and turn 'a commitment to emancipatory social practice and politics into a commitment to the political empowering of pleasure', promoting a moral thinking which is free from social interest. Studies looking to understand how people interpret the world or certain phenomena might be extremely focused on the subjective dimension of reality, where what is real is only what is constructed in the mind of the individual (although a socialised one, as social representations rely on communication). Hence, rural authors of a political economy approach have raised concerns about the consequences that ignoring the structures of our society might have politically (Hoggart and Paniagua 2001), such as how the argument about the differentiated rural lifestyles might also be used in favour of a politics of individual responsibility (Cloke 1997). As rural areas and rural lifestyles are so different, in short, rural socio-economies should manage their diversity by themselves, within their own collective systems.

### 1.2.5 The relational rural: shaping the rural space

There are, however, different ways to argue for the rural as a social representation. Not all social representations take place at the same scale, some gaining widespread status and others confined to limited groups. The reason this distinction is important is that it implies that 'there is an alternative way of defining rurality which, initially, does not require us to abstract causal structures operating at the rural scale' (Halfacree 1993, 29). Ideas created around the rural are, in short, just as important as its materiality, and so it is who governs those ideas, who proposes them, who enacts them. In the economic sphere, state and companies will arguably be in the first line, and their representations 'must be seen as causative, "channelling" causation, although not causal' (ibid., 32). Hence, although the rural is extremely diverse, and although the position of the researcher favours certain belief systems and ontological and epistemological stances, it is also

clear that in most cases hardly would this make a difference. There is a need to start from those who make the rural. If accepting such proposition, it is possible to see the contemporaneous existence and, importantly, real-life influences that representations have and how these are dependent upon the *relative* historical luggage entities or people have or their everyday experiences. These observations are indispensably highly contextual.

One work that makes a powerful case for joining political economy approaches and the rural as a social representation is Halfacree's (2006) work on the three-fold architecture of the rural. Halfacree proposed the use of Lefebvre's spatial triad to understand the rural with a sense of unity. For Halfacree, it is fetishistic to think about rural space as either material or ideational, as only contextual practice can reveal the 'truth'. Halfacree highlights that the rural, and space more in general, is 'created in a whole series of forms and at a series of scales by social individuals', implying that different entities and agents might bring forward contrasting views and understandings of space. In particular, Halfacree drew from Lefebvre's articulation of the abstract space of capitalism, whereby:

> Space… is both abstract and concrete in character: abstract inasmuch as it has no existence save by virtue of the exchangeability of all its component parts, and concrete inasmuch as it is socially real and as such localized. This is a space, therefore, that is homogenous yet at the same time broken up into fragments (Lefebvre, 1991a: 341–2; emphasis in original, cited in Halfacree 2006, p.10).

In Lefebvre's account, space is an essential part of how we experience the world. Space is not only physical, but also mental as formal abstractions, and social as the locus of human interaction (Merrifield 2006). Lefebvre's interest was never in space per se, but in the alienation and abstraction characteristic of capitalist modernity. His elaboration on abstract space indicated the spatial dimension of a critique on 'the devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived, by abstraction' (Lefebvre, 1980/2006, 10, cited in Wilson 2013, 366). Abstraction is a governing principle of the capitalist order, and, just like abstract labour in Marx strips all the qualitative differences of labour by subsuming them under the anonymous money system, where all labour is quantitatively expressible as a part of the exchange value system, abstract space is the attempt to homogenise place, turn it into a commodity and hence break the link between the human and earth and the social relations which form within them. Abstraction is therefore 'a concrete historical process in which capital accumulation and technocratic rationality — materiality and representation — are dialectically intertwined' (Wilson 2013, 367).

To grasp the interactions among materiality and representation, Lefebvre presented his spatial triad, three facets constituting space as a social product and a means of production, *representations of space* (conceived space), *spatial practices* (perceived space), and *spaces of representation* (lived space) (Watkins 2005; Merrifield 2006; Wilson 2013), where the term representation indicates the cognitive level, something which takes place in the mind. At any

given permanence, one facet of the spatial triad might become more dominant than the other one (Halfacree 2006).

*Representations of space* refer to 'conceptualized space, to the space constructed by assorted professionals and technocrats. […] this is always a conceived space; usually ideology, power, and knowledge lurk within its representation' (Merrifield 2006, 109). Under capitalism, the dominant representation of space is abstract space, which attempts to subordinate differentiated places to the logic of capital: accumulation and growth, calculation, planning, programming and so forth. Land is a commodity, bought and sold in the market which gives meaning to it, a fragment, that is, of abstraction and its properties of homogeneity, divisibility, and interchangeability, emptied of all natural and social content (Wilson 2013). Abstract space is also the space conceived by the state, capital, and the bourgeoisie, which try to erase places' histories, politics and classes to organise society rationally by the use of forcefully analogous measures, assisted by knowledge and technology (Wilson 2013). Applied to the study of the rural, understanding representations of space means giving priority to the way the rural is constructed by policy-makers, bureaucrats, capitalists and so forth, what Halfacree terms formal representations of the rural (2006). For instance, productivism in the agricultural sector has been for long a major formal representation of the rural in the UK and in Europe, at least in the post-war period, as well as it was the contradictory pastoral view of the rural. Since the 1980s, alternative ways of commodifying the countryside have emerged which are fundamentally heterogeneous, as seen in the rural restructuring section.

*Spaces of representation* are 'directly lived spaces, the space of everyday experience [… ] felt more than thought', alive and immensely elusive (Merrifield, 109-110). Abstract space becomes concrete as it attempts to conquer such spaces, depriving them of their spontaneity and diversity and thus attacking the creative capacity of human kind to produce their material and representational spaces (Wilson 2013). If the attempt of the dominant class and the state under capitalism is to create homogenised places, resistance by people to the logic they impose-propose might offer agency a way out. Halfacree (2006) describes everyday lives of the rural as inevitably incoherent and fractured, continuously interacting with both formal representations of the rural and their spatial practices. Under productivist agriculture, for instance, the importance given to the sector gave a sense of false security to farmers, economically and regarding their role in society. At the same time other economic activities, or types of agriculture which were not of a productivist type, continued to exist, resisting the new mainstream logic of accumulation. With the decline of agriculture, however, certainty turned into uncertainty, and the frameworks people used to make sense of their world gradually crumbled.

Finally, *spatial practices* 'propound and propose [society's space] … have close affinities with *perceived* space, to people's perceptions of the world, their world, its everyday ordinariness. Thus spatial practices structure lived reality, […] embrace production and reproduction, conception and execution, the conceived as well as the lived; they somehow ensure societal cohesion, continuity' (ibid., 110). In a rural context and in relation to the rural literature, this means looking at rural localities, inscribed through distinctive spatial practices (Halfacree 2006). For instance, agricultural practices and support services meant to increase productivity, harvest festivals, small market towns, out-migration, all characterised the productivist countryside. With the decline of agriculture, the trends described above concerning rural restructuring could be visualised in the countryside: exploitation of marginality, commodification of rural imaginary and so forth. Halfacree takes the rural further into the post-productivist countryside, something I will refrain from doing, because, if anything, the emergence of a postproductivist countryside, being largely speculative, should come from the case.

## 1.3 Reflections and research questions

Navigating the rural and rural phenomena is complex. Most of the contention about the rural derives from definitional issues and is, essentially, of a methodological nature. The diversity of the rural has pushed scholars to look for ways to make reasonable generalisations about how these socio-economies work, with disparate solutions: trying to find patterns by simultaneously describing the rural and then assessing the incidence of certain social phenomena; proposing normative views which establish hierarchies based on desirable types of social relations; elevating agriculture as the distinguishing mark of the rural; discarding the rural by focusing on localities and their interactions with the capitalist system; or discarding all generalisations by emphasising lived experience and the subjective meaning of the rural. Finally, it has been recognised that these views coexist, rather than being mutually exclusive, if looking at space from a relational perspective.

All these views have their advantages and disadvantages. Works using descriptive definitions risk to bypass the nuances among territories, excluding or including places without necessarily reflecting or grasping their socio-economic conditions. They are also overwhelmingly biased towards describing environmental conditions, but pay less attention to the degree in which agency might change them. Nonetheless, these generalisations, often proposed for policy-making purposes and thus affecting the allocation of values and resources, highlight trends which might be commonly encountered by private economic agents.

Socio-cultural definitions are problematic on a number of levels, trying to look for rurality while at the same time constructing it (in the mind of the researcher) and biased towards the positive

sides or the rural. They are largely ahistorical and lack contextual reflections. They do reflect, however, the crisis of our times, the search for alternatives to how we live, and they do so by focusing on private economic agents, welcoming the idea that the production and reproduction of spaces will partially depend on the behaviours and perceptions of people. Unfortunately, they do so by confining this search in certain spaces, and the aspirations of being the best version of society or individuals is denied based on space. They are interrupted ideals.

Works which emphasise agriculture are able to grasp the importance of history for the evolution of rural socio-economies. Agriculture was not, and it is argued is still not, a sector like any other, economically and politically, and this had influences on how state-rural relationships have been organised. These relations may unfold in the long term. However, the focus on agriculture has played against paying attention to the evolution of wider rural socio-economies after the decline of the sector. The locality literature picks up on such a downside to show how the rural has been reshaped by the capitalist dynamics on all its facets, and, to a certain extent, by recognising that the state is a major 'actor' in shaping these dynamics. However, this is a literature that tends to be less attentive to agents, because of its focus on mid- to long-term dynamics. Agents are largely bypassed, as if processes need not to be digested to be created, resisted, or reproduced.

Finally, while subjective social representations on the rural based on everyday life were only slightly touched upon, in good part because the literature found seems irrelevant, being based on language and little on practice, it was seen that the rural can be understood in a relational way, as being co-constituted by different dimensions. The major advantage of this view is that it allows to 'suspend' the meaningfulness of the rural, and explore through practical engagement what it means as well as how it is acted upon by recognising the immaterial and material aspects of the making of the rural.

In consideration of the problems in defining what the rural is, the research posits that the approaches that can best assist in studying rural resilience are the relational rural and the rural as a locality. It has been recognised that rural resilience is not a one size fits all issue or solution and that definitions and question formulation about resilience should be 'situated' within political and cultural heterogeneities (Cote and Nightingale 2012), especially considering the variety of rural areas (McIntosh et al. 2008). Although rural socio-economies might not exist, it does not mean that they cannot be created. By engaging with Halfacree's (2006) three-fold architecture of the rural, it is possible not only to frame the rural, but also to frame problems in a way which is relevant to the context. It allows for an exploratory path to the study of rural resilience, which can take into account the different forces at play which help shaping rural phenomena, those related to state actions and understandings and those stemming from individuals. Differently stated, the initial emphasis on interpretations means that, rather than specifying from the beginning in

which areas state or individuals influence or are influenced by the rural, the researcher is 'led' by their portrayal of the rural and of its problems, and the roles that they attribute to each other. Each country will have, potentially, a different vision on what their rural problems are, and what building rural resilience will entail.

Hence, the research advances two overarching questions:

1. *To what extent can the state shape rural resilience?*

2. *To what extent can private economic agents shape rural resilience?*

The view of the rural as a locality complements the view of the relational rural. Clearly, it is more intuitive to start investigations of the rural from the perspective of those who have more capacity in terms of reach to make rural resilience. By joining the view of the rural as a locality, complex and diversified, it is possible to overcome the risks that the view of the rural espoused by the state might systematically erase any form of diversity present in a socio-economy or the structural problems that might be annexed to certain socio-economies. These are points that are embedded in the research strategy included in the methodology section.

# 2. The Context: Approaching Rural Japan and Resilience

The chapter aims to situate the concept of rural resilience in Japan. Firstly, it introduces how the relationship between state and rural socio-economies has evolved from the post-war until the 2000s. It attempts to contextualise how the rural has been for long understood and acted upon in Japan. In particular, it shows how the state penetrated rural socio-economies through specific agrarian institutions. With the collapse of agriculture and the arrival of austerity, rural Japan has been left in a state of disarray.

Secondly, the chapter contextualises the concept of resilience by introducing one of the main challenges faced by Japan, how to deal with the Post Demographic Transition (PDT). In particular, the chapter reviews the grey literature on how demographic changes have been shaping and are expected to shape the future of the country. The concept of resilience is based on the state of continuous demographic decline and ageing. While social measures might be better to tackle demographic decline, economic measures have been overwhelmingly preferred by the Japanese state in a context of fiscal austerity. These measures provide an overall direction on how rural resilience can be observed, at least looking from the perspective on how resilience should be built by the state. Moreover, demographic changes have reinforced trends already visible in the 1990s on who should be responsible for taking actions at the local level to create resilience.

## 2.1 The changing relationship between state and the rural

The Japanese state has been widely recognised for its role in transforming Japan into a successful capitalist economy (Cumings 1984; Amsden 1992; Lee 2008; Wu 2004; Kohli 1994; Chang 2000). Known as the Capitalist Development State (hereafter, CDS), it delivered growth rates of 8-10 between the 1950s and 1970s (Haghirian 2015a) through a careful balance between private growth and social benefits (Johnson 1982, 1988; Dahrendorf 1968). Since the beginning of the modernisation process, the state's control of rural socio-economies was at the basis of the capitalist accumulation process through the exploitation of agriculture, the modernisation of the mining industry and the formation of a capitalist class (Matsuda 1981; Fukutake 1972; Byres 1986; Kasahara 1996; Kazuo 1966; Francks 2002; Grabowiecki 2006; Sippel 2006).

Nonetheless, what has forged the traditional relationship between state and rural areas has been the post-war period. During this period, the view of the rural as a socio-economy organised around agriculture became established and forged in institutions which have survived today. Under the US occupation (1945-52), Japan implemented a series of reforms of political nature to placate the countryside discontent and start rebuilding the country. In particular, there are two

major events which had long lasting effects on the relationship between state and rural socio-economies: the 1946-47 land reform and the emergence of the 1955 system.

### 2.1.1 The land reform: from political solution to economic problem

The post-war land reform is arguably one of the most important reforms shaping the Japanese countryside, because it helped cementing the small family farm as the dominant form of production in Japan, with important political and economic consequences on the countryside.

Land reforms have different aims and forms (King 2019), but in Japan the land reform was an organised attempt by the US occupation forces and the Japanese state to eradicate Communism and turn the Japanese countryside into a conservative haven (Ōchi 1966)[11]. Before the land reform, there was widespread discontent in the Japanese countryside, and tenant farming and exploitative practices were the norm. Just as posited in the New Rural Sociology literature, the Japanese post-war land reform, a land to the tiller programme (exhaustively reviewed in: Ōchi 1966; Kawagoe 1999; Kitamura 2022), reorganised the social conformation of rural economies by changing the pre-existing land property right system, so that six million owner-farmers households possessing land plots of less than one hectare became responsible for feeding the nation (Kitamura 2016; McDonald 1997).

The political aims of the land reform are evident when considering that a major problem of Japanese agriculture has always been the small size of farms. Despite awareness that shaping a capitalist agriculture entailed concentrating land rather than reproducing the same ownership and production patterns through a peasantry to peasantry change of hands (Kawagoe 1999), the reforms were tailored to make the consolidation of land harder so as to prevent the regeneration of the landlord class, and, in so doing, they made land ownership and use a heavily state-mediated matter (McDonald 1997). The Agriculture Land Law of 1952 established a rigid system of land property rights meant to protect the status of farming families, legitimating their existence, and essentially preventing the entry of non-farmers in agriculture. Scholars state that the law 'was imposed to freeze the mode of production' (Kawagoe 1999,35), that 'Japanese agriculture has certainly been thoroughly penetrated by capitalism, but not by capitalist relations of production'

[11] The US dispatched scholars to grasp the essence of rural societies and the socio-conditions of the countryside. Interestingly enough, one of the ways in which the US tradition on rural studies and research standards was strengthened in Japan was through US anthropologists trying to capture, through the description of places and interpretations of cultures, the relationship between social formations, political positioning, and nationalism. US and European authors were, however, influential even before (Chie 1970). Sukuzi Eitaro applied concepts from early American sociologists such as Galpin and Sorokin in 1930s-1940s in his studies on the Japanese village, centred on the notion of the village as a social entity and the hamlet as the natural social unit (the natural village, *shizenson*) (Beardsley et al. 1970, 117; Sofue 1961). Nonetheless, during the occupation US research practice spread.

(Byres 1986, 49), and that farming households had become 'tenants of the state' (McDonald 1997, 60). Hence, the land reform cemented the small family farm as the dominant form of production for political reasons, and, in so doing, created the premises for successive problems in rural economies.

As a matter of fact, the agricultural legal system stood to protect farmers even when the agricultural population started its dramatic decline in the 1960s, problems of rural depopulation first arose, and so did the first revitalisation efforts by the state (Feldhoff 2013) and territorially specific legislations, such as the Mountain Village Development Law of 1965 and the Depopulated Areas Special Measures Law of 1970 (Goto 2008). It was only starting from the 1980s-1990s that the slow, gradual shift towards the dismantling of the post-war land reform and the principle of land to the tiller started taking shape. From the mid-1980s, the state of agriculture was worrisome, and the agricultural population kept declining. Industrial capital started voicing the costs and risks that agriculture was bringing to the signing of international free trade agreements (Choi and Oh 2011; Godo 2009; Yamashita 2006). Japan was expected to be exposed to more aggressive international competition. The MAFF also introduced new areas of action to justify its size by embedding green tourism, food and nutrition education, food traceability, and food security in its agenda – thus embracing notions on the multifunctionality of rural areas (Godo 2009). The context, the market, and the system of support (more later) around agriculture needed a rethinking.

In Japan, part of the blame for the lack of productivity of agriculture has been given to institutional factors, especially the land reform, while social factors such as depopulation and ageing have been seen as opportunities as well as obstacles for the sector. Since the 1990s, calls for reforms of the institutions regulating agriculture became vocal. Land use rights have always been fluid at the informal level and new management forms other than pure farmers started to appear since the 1961 Basic Law of Agriculture (McDonald 1997). Corporations too, while not allowed to enter agriculture directly, have also been involved in agriculture (Jentzsch 2017), for example, by outsourcing. However, by the 1990s, the farmers' population was one third that of the 1960s. Farmers were getting old. Depopulation and ageing had made agricultural land vastly available (Su, Okahashi, and Chen 2018), and surely facilitated the acceptance of reforms, simply because there have been less and less farmers to form opposition.

Land consolidation programmes gained popularity in the 1990s and became even more audacious in the 2000s, when state policies challenging small farmers' previously untouchable position were introduced. The revision of the Agricultural Land Law created Farmland Harmonization Groups under control of local agricultural coops, agricultural committees, and the agricultural offices of municipal governments, and formally included the deregulation of

corporate farmland access by co-investing as minority partners with farmers (Jentzsch 2017; see also: Shimizu 2017 for a detailed account on transformation of the agricultural sector). Economically, the basic assumption of farmland banks is that they lower transaction costs for parties, providing information and guaranteeing that land is not misused and will not be withdrawn during the period of agreement (10 years). Land consolidation is obviously a premise for capitalist agriculture, and, considering that the average size of a field in Japan today is 1.8 hectare for commercial farms excluding Hokkaido (DoA 2020), it might indeed help raise productivity. The basic assumption of letting corporations invest in agriculture, on the contrary, is that new management styles would inject a mentality of profit to the sector as well as the technological capital to make it productive, making it more efficient and thereby helping, on the one hand, the downsizing of the number of farms through competition, and, on the other, decreasing the pressures of the state to support these segments of the population.

Geographical, ecological, or technical considerations for the difficulties faced by the agricultural sector lack equal voice in the policy making sphere, and there is an intrinsic bias that the existence of technologies for production under artificial conditions will automatically translate into use or incentive for use. Most of the assumptions for a new competitive agriculture have been based only on the potential size of farms and economic reasoning, ignoring, for instance, how the ecology and morphology of Japan make it hard to switch crops in paddy rice fields into more profitable upland vegetable production (Kleinhenz, Schnitzler, and Midmore 1996) or the positive externalities of paddy fields against natural calamities, notwithstanding their aesthetic and cultural value (Iwanaga 2001). Indeed, programmes for crop diversification have existed since the 1970s and are updated today with the hope that Japan will improve its low food sufficiency and channel agriculture towards the current demands and changing diets of the Japanese (Fujibayashi 2021) [12]. Moreover, the topology of Japan might make it difficult to implement land consolidation programmes consistently through territories, as scattered land plots are also a consequence of the natural conformation of territories (Feldhoff 2013). Agriculture is not, in short, equally feasible or profitable in all the country, and so, even when given the legal environment to expand, the consolidation of land or the alteration of property rights at this point of history might not be sufficient to develop competitive agricultural businesses.

Surely, the government is aware that there are disadvantages in agricultural production in different areas of Japan, as evident by the nature of its own support measures. According to MAFF, there were 73,759 rural communities residing in hilly and mountainous areas in 2015, or 53.3

[12] Japan's calorie-based food self-sufficiency rate has declined over time, especially for some crops. For example, in 2021 Japan produced 98 percent of its rice (102 in 1960), 30 percent of its fruits and 76 of its vegetables (100 in 1960) and 16 percent of stock farm products (91) (The Diplomat 2022).

percent of the total number of rural communities, occupying 40.9 percent of the Japanese farmland area, and representing 44.2 percent of its farm households and 40.8 percent of the total agricultural output value (MAFF 2021). The 1999 Basic Law for Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas grants these localities the right to be supported in agricultural activities if aiming at the safeguarding of the environment or its multifunctionality (Honma 2000)[13]. Since 2000, direct subsidies have thus been made available to help these 'rural communities', as they are often referred to in policy documents, keep agricultural production *despite* their unfavourable conditions and to maintain community engagement and local resource management (OECD 2021b). However, exactly because the same communities that are supposed to carry them out are disappearing, the sustainability of such policies has been questioned (Kobayashi et al. 2020). Land consolidation might hence not benefit all regions equally, and where land is made free, most likely it is because the conditions for production of a capitalist type might not be ideal.

The land reform has helped make and reinforce the family farm as the dominant mode of agricultural production in the Japanese panorama, but the state had opportunities in the successive decades to revise its position. The failure to reform substantially the agricultural property right system is linked to the role that the rural vote, back then essentially the agricultural vote, had on the wider political economy. Under the Capitalist Developmental State, the crucial mechanisms through which the state was able to maintain remarkable growth and high standards of living throughout the nation despite the widening differential productivity between regions was the 1955 system. This is seen below.

### 2.1.2 The 1955 system and the role of the rural

The 1955 system describes the political economic system under which Japan was governed from 1955, when the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) became established as the leading party of Japan, until its first electoral defeat in 1993. The 1955 system was based on the triangular relationship between the LDP, the bureaucracy and big business, each performing a different role. The state bureaucracy drafted social and economic policies, while the LDP turned them into legislation, adjusting the target according to public reception. Large corporations received exclusive

[13] As Article 35 recites:
1. The State shall take necessary measures, in areas with poor geographical conditions and disadvantages in agricultural production including mountainous areas (hereinafter referred to as 'hilly and mountainous areas'), such as increasing job opportunities by promoting agricultural and other businesses through the introduction of new types of crops and the production/distribution of regional specialties, taking such regional characteristics into consideration and promoting the settlement of people through improved living conditions';
2. The State shall take specific measures for the fulfilment of the multifunctional roles of agriculture in hilly and mountainous areas, by providing support to compensate for disadvantages in agricultural production conditions so that such areas can maintain adequate production activities.

information and incentives on investment opportunities through the bureaucracy and, in exchange, financially supported the LDP and negotiated with the state on labour relations.

In this configuration, rural areas had a very precise role, legitimising the rule of the LDP. As business groups were important sources of funding but poor conveyors of votes (Maclachlan 2014), a very complex system had to be built to favour the exchange of political and economic favours between state and rural. Mostly, resource allocation to rural areas took place through industrial policy, which in Japan included market, regulatory, and allocatory types of intervention, often used in conjunction (George-Mulgan 2005). Agriculture became not only a heavily protected sector, but also a sector dependent on the state as its main market, dragging with it the rest of the rural. But the LDP also sponsored rural public works to gain political profits, create rural wealth and employment, and renovate the cycle (Johnson 1982).

The system of exchange was driven by specific political actors, the so-called 'agriculture policy triangle', made of Diet members from the LDP, agricultural bureaucrats from the MAFF, and executives from the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives Group (hereafter, JA) (George-Mulgan 2016, 223) [14]. In particular, JA's role in rural affairs has been key. JA is not a governmental association, but a national organisation of farmers incorporated in policy making as a representative of farmers and an agent for the government in the administration of agricultural policy (George-Mulgan 2016).

This complex Japanese institution has been seen as the fundamental link between rural economies, their people, and the state. The penetration of the state at the local level has always been dependent for its functioning on the social institutions of the agrarian society (Fukutake 1972). JA had a mobilisation capacity and a capillarity which no other institution enjoyed, being present in each locality in constant contact with farmers and their families (Horiuchi and Saito 2010; Maclachlan 2014). The sharing of communal resources and activities implied in rice cultivation meant that tight contacts between households was a daily routine (Godo 2009). Obviously, JA's services were fully paid back. The organisation enjoyed monopolistic privileges on a number of fronts until the 1990s (Yamashita 2013; Godo 2014; Esham et al. 2012)

JA has been deemed the instrument through which the state for long blocked the market mechanism to maintain small traditional farming communities (Godo 2009). It lent the LDP the organisational capacity needed, working as an incredibly efficient vote machine. According to

[14] The complexity of the agricultural legal framework is far beyond the scope of the exposition. There are numerous authors specialised in agriculture, agricultural policy and agricultural protectionism in Japan from different perspectives to which readers can refer (George-Mulgan 2005, 2016, 2015; Honma 2000; Honma and Hayami 2008; Honma and George Mulgan 2018; Francks, Boestel, and Kim 1999; Francks 2015; Kym, Hayami, and Mulgan 1986).

Horiuchi and Saito (2010), the rural vote has been so important that the extensive rural support package has created distortions in the movement of labour from rural to urban areas, allowing farmers with below profitability fields not to migrate. Aside from agricultural support, farmers' support included selective benefits reaching *specific* localities. The appellative 'construction state' (McCormack 1995) refers to the frequent use of allocatory intervention in rural areas through, for example, government commissioned irrigation projects or roads, which would assign work to local construction companies and, indirectly, part-time farmers (Horiuchi and Saito 2010). Even natural calamities have been, from an economic perspective, a source of revenues with mixed outcomes, as the construction sector is the sector that benefits the most from such occurrences (Ashizawa, Sudo, and Yamamoto 2022). The full entourage of the rural economy was, in short, understood and constructed as an expression of agriculture-related needs.

Of course, agricultural policy was not the only way in which the state supported rural areas. Other policies, such as SMEs policies, have also been deemed to resemble forms of welfare meant to keep alive a variety of 'zombie' firms by guaranteeing access to regional banks' loans in exchange for political favours (Shimizu 2014). Moreover, although there has been scarce academic attention to the manufacturing sector in rural areas, it became a focal centre of local administrations in the 1960s-1970s, principally in the form of development of industrial areas meant to host manufacturing enterprises relocating from urban areas (Sargent 1980; Yoshioka and Kawasaki 2016). Such neglect in the literature is somewhat troublesome, because, although many phenomena taking place in the rural can be related to agriculture, the ones that cannot are left unexplored (at least in the English literature). State policies were never based exclusively on rural socio-economies, but as an interaction between territories based on (and biased towards) industrial location considerations and capital requirements.

The state thus created a mutual dependence with ambiguous results. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the transfer of revenues and alternative employment to rural economies complemented the livelihood of the substrata of small businesses, while creating a situation of dependence of rural socio-economies from the state. The reallocation of resources did contribute to harmonising losses from uneven regional productivity in rural areas, so that Japan's post-war history has been accompanied by substantial income balance with gaps enlarging again since the 1980s (Pempel 2017). What it could not do in its form was to grow healthy socio-economies. Being based on a political bargain and on the growth of the overall economy, it exposed rural socio-economies to the on-off connection between the economy and politics, fulfilling 'the story of the sorcerer's apprentice who, unlike the master, turns out to be unable to control the forces he has unleashed' (Hirschman 1994, 345).

### 2.1.3 Breaking the 1955 system

The disconnection between political and economic aims is what could be seen since the mid-1980s and the 1990s, when the 1955 system began to crumble, and maintaining the rural and agricultural system in its shape became a problem. From the 1980s, the Japanese political economy started to change substantially. The LDP lost the elections (Dore 1998; Kushida and Shimizu 2013), and Japan was hit by international shocks which eventually helped usher in the long period of economic recession known as the Lost Decade (Edgington 2006). Regional inequality took the upper curve, as the rise of the high-tech and service industries increased concentration in Tokyo and in prefectures with high labour productivity, unsurprisingly located in urban areas (Tokui, Makino, and Fukao 2015). Rural areas, on the contrary, were already suffering the consequences of the previous rounds of migration and the first signs of concentrated ageing and decline (Lützeler 2008). As the shape of the CDS was being questioned (Pempel 1997, 2011; Weiss 2000), the mechanisms to redistribute resources to rural areas started to crumble, and fiscal austerity reached the countryside. From the mid-1980s, the relationship between state and rural was being redefined due to the reconfiguration of the alliance between the MAFF, the LDP and JA (Maclachlan 2014).

JA was the first institution to be attacked, as the LDP gradually started to keep its distance. JA essentially became an unnecessary partner. This was largely due to its weakened position since the 1970s and 1980s. The decrease in the number of farmers and the liberalisation of the agricultural and financial sector led to the restructuring of the group, which today derives the core of its profits from banking and insurance under the slogan 'not only farming but also rural living overall' (cited in: Godo 2014). As unit cooperatives decreased (Esham et al. 2012), the capillarity of JA's power in localities also diminished (Godo 2014). Other exclusive privileges, such as JA's monopsonist position as seller of agricultural fertiliser, were also removed, and even today agricultural machinery and inputs companies might report JA as a competitor (this, indeed, is the case in the sample studied). In the mid-2000s, JA's membership base started to be split in half between farmers and non-farmers (Esham et al. 2012), signalling a new era where JA needs as diversified customers as possible.

JA became also increasingly associated with unproductive agriculture. Signs of internal divisions between part-time farmers and full-time farmers became more accentuated, and, relatedly, the relationship between JA and farmers itself changed. JA could not anymore represent the rural, as it had to prioritise factions — something which made its mobilisation efforts less effective (Maclachlan 2014). Partially as a response to international pressures, the 1980s saw the partial liberalisation of agricultural goods to international trade (see: Yoshioka and Kawasaki 2016),

creating a first layer of differentiation of farmers along product specifics. In 1995 came also one of the biggest blows to small, part-time farmers with the repeal of the 1942 Food Control Law (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016). Because JA's power has been tied to the small farm and the system of subsidies, each of these policies contributes to decreasing its power.

Politically, full-time farmers and part-time farmers became split between the former group, which largely favoured a commercial agriculture with full competition, and the latter group, which wanted to keep the business-as-usual, protected way to operate, creating frictions within localities (Wood 2012). Full-time commercial farmers tended to criticise JA, most commonly blamed for its unwillingness to differentiate the quality and price of products and for the lack of transformation of the agricultural sector through its insistence on the family farm. Small farmers, on the contrary, might support JA, as the organisation is still one of the few ways farmers have to have guaranteed purchases of their products, and lobbying efforts. JA still enjoys considerable power in agricultural matters and in mobilising votes. Often, its personnel sits on local agricultural committees, and JA can effectively attempt to block the formation of larger agricultural producers by intervening on land transactions. Nonetheless, as the power of agriculture is declining, it is clear that the state and the political system need not to rely on JA anymore.

Although it should not be assumed that JA has been a positive or negative actor for rural socio-economies, as many differences appear to exist in the various local unit cooperatives, it is clear that attempts to dismantle or reduce the power of the organisation might potentially leave a vacuum of representation for rural areas. Having been such a fundamental link between state and people, especially bringing resources to all the areas in Japan, the displacement of JA without the creation of alternative collective organisations might be a win for some, but a loss for many.

### 2.1.4 Neoliberalism reaches the countryside

As a matter of fact, the attack on JA is part of a larger trend to alter the traditional state-rural relationship. The beginning of the 2000s is indeed a very important period for rural socio-economies, as the bases for the transformation from a rural dependent on the state to one which should be self-reliant were set for the next decade to come.

One of the key LDP figures going against rural-organised interests was Prime Minister Koizumi (2001-2006). Koizumi emphasised the salience of 'enhancing the autonomy of localities and expansion of their discretionary capabilities' and the notion that the central government should be 'leaving to the localities what they can do' (cited in: Elis 2011, 529). Elis, the same author reporting Koizumi's words, noted that the statement could be interpreted as much as a sincere commitment to decentralisation as an 'announcement of a new regional policy stance

characterised by the expectation that local governments should fend for themselves rather than depending on support by the central government' (ibid.). The second line seems, with the insight of the future, more convincing.

Firstly, under the Koizumi administration, the bulk of Heisei mergers (1999-2006) was carried out. Conceived to reduce national-level budget expenditures through the decentralisation of government functions and to improve efficiency in service provision by compactisation, but promoted as measures to pursue sustainable regional revitalisation, the mergers resulted in the near halving of municipalities, from 3,232 to 1,727 in 2006 (Rausch 2015). It is difficult to escape why smaller municipalities did not take this move well: mergers meant that smaller socio-economies, such as villages and hamlets, would renounce to their administrations and services to see them concentrated in larger units to avoid declaring financial bankruptcy; schools and hospitals closed; the financially-broken or poor localities saw an increased competition for central government's funds, as the centre of the newly-organised municipality tended to invest in core areas rather than peripheral ones; and local identities were lost with the dismantling of communal functions previously sponsored by the local administration (ibid.). Central government's funds were themselves decreased, when the size of the Fiscal Investment and Loan Programme, the country's 'second budget', was re-dimensioned (Kushida and Shimizu 2013; Maclachlan 2014), and localities had to fight among themselves to get a share of the resources.

Secondly, the effects of the mergers on local socio-economies was made worse by the Koizumi's Trinity reforms (2003-2007). Many small local governments in Japan have never enjoyed discretion on how to spend in development projects, as they could barely cover the costs of delivering indispensable services, relying on transfers from the central government to meet basic needs. As reported by Song (2015), tax revenues were mostly collected at the central level, while spending took place disproportionately at the local level to fund public services, such as education, public health, police and fire control. To narrow economic differences among localities, two instruments were used. The Local Allocation Tax (LAT), a general fiscal subsidy from the central government to local governments, served to equalise living standards, while the national treasury disbursements (NTDs) were specific subsidies tied to individual projects allocated to localities to fund joint projects between the central and local governments, such as infrastructural development projects.

In theory, the Trinity reform package of the local financial system aimed, on the one hand, at a sounder fiscal administration and, on the other, at the promotion of the autonomy and independence of local governments and the decentralisation of power (see Ikawa 2007 for a detailed account). Accordingly, cuts in the LAT grants and reduction in NTD were supposed to reduce the burden of the intergovernmental finance system on the national budget, while the

transfer of additional tax income resources to local governments was meant to compensate local governments for the loss resulting from the changes in income redistribution (Elis 2011).

The policy, however, resulted in greater regional and local Inequality. During the Koizumi cabinet, the top five richest prefectures, densely populated urban areas, experienced substantial growth in GDP per capita, by 187,000 yen on average, while the bottom five poorest prefectures, rural areas, showed a decrease in GDP per capita of 13,800 yen (Song 2015). The expectations of local governments to gain better control of their financial resources and a more even distribution were amply disappointed when they realised that they had to deliver the same financial, administrative and political policies with less personnel due to rationalisation, and with less resources, as the local public finance programme and the total amount of LAT had been significantly reduced, and newly transferred tax incomes resources were insufficient to cover the losses (Ikawa 2007). Rural areas, particularly mountainous areas, were obviously against the reforms. Urban areas welcomed the reforms because the transfer of additional tax income resources, which depend on the size of the population of taxpayers, could compensate for the cut in subsidies, grants, and LAT. With small populations and the historical dependence on central transfers, rural and remote areas had all to lose. Just being at more advanced stages of ageing meant they would require more resources to support the delivery of the healthcare system. Where to find the money to support their population became a problem, and it is not a surprise that the Heisei Mergers and Koizumi reforms have been found to have accelerated depopulation in peripheral areas, as people seek, among others, to be closer to the necessities of life (Elis 2011).

Obviously, the decrease in central transfers did affect JA, too — it decreased its capacity to attract funds, and hence votes. However, although much weakened, rural votes still count more than urban votes because of the way the electoral system works in Japan, with pork-barrelling bringing important investments in rural areas and creating dissatisfaction among the majority of urban voters (*NY Times* 2021). The LDP would be punished for its renege of the rural interest in the 2009 elections, when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) stole the LDP's electoral battle horses, appealing directly to farmers and small businesses with financial support (see: Araki 2012). It did so, however, despising JA, which symbolised the LDP's rural arm, and appealing directly to farmers with the promise of direct subsidies (Mulgan 2011). The DPJ did not last long in government, as Japan was hit by a series of unfortunate events (such as the 2008 crisis and the Fukushima nuclear disaster), but it did teach the LDP a lesson: rural votes need not pass through JA, if appealing directly to farmers. Having to balance urban and rural votes, both parties also converged to the centre, with catch-all campaign manifestos (Reed, Scheiner, and Thies 2012). It is thus not clear which direction rural policy will take in the future.

As the dismantling of the strongest ties linking rural socio-economies and the state has already begun, the state has more space to carve its relationship with the future of rural socio-economies. In the meantime, rural socio-economies are left short of means to fight the problems that they face. With little incentive to innovate their overall socio-economic fabric, and with even less resources to do so, they have been struggling to stop the social changes taking place, and their population keep decreasing, ageing, and out-migrating. Even worse, this condition is affecting the whole of Japan, and hence is creating the basis for even more competition for resources.

## 2.2 Creating resilience during the Post-Demographic Transition: challenges, solutions, and roles

Many high income countries are seeing their rural population decreasing, but Japan, with only 8 percent of its population being classified as rural, seems to precede other high income countries in the loss of rural diversity. Differently from most of the world, however, it is not only the rural population that is declining and ageing in Japan: the whole population is. Since the 1980s, births have been steadily decreasing, and in 2015, Japan reported the first negative growth (MIAFC 2021).

Starting from the 2010s, Japan has formally embraced the challenge of demographic changes as a matter to be solved under supervision of the state, with the key goal of maintaining the population at 100 million people in 2060 (Cabinet Secretariat n.d.). Although numerous, scattered measures have been proposed and implemented before the 2010s, it was under the Abe administration and his famous Abenomics, launched in 2012, that a strategy for how the future economy should work in a context of demographic changes was delineated – a vision contained in the Japan Revitalisation Strategy (JRS).

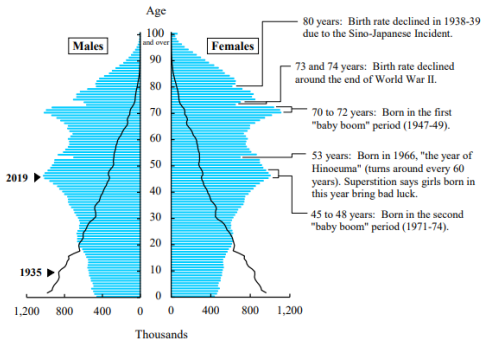
As it will be explained in the methodology, further engagement with the JRS will be undertaken in the findings section to understand its spatial elements. In the following section, the main challenges and related areas of action deriving from the Post-Demographic Transition (PDT) are firstly introduced, followed by the solutions proposed by the state to cope with demographic changes, including who should be responsible for what in the vortex of population decline and ageing.

### 2.2.1 Coping with the Post Demographic Transition: insights from the literature

The PDT describes when low fertility rates, accompanied by low mortality rates, converge to produce slow population declines. Japan is the global front runner of this 'new stage of an endless population decline along with below-replacement fertility and ultra-aged population which humankind has never experienced' (Sato and Kaneko 2014, 4).

Although demographic declines are worrisome in the longer term, concerns about population size are often replaced by those about the age structure of the population (see: Figure 2), especially because of the estimated economic effects posited to be on the horizon (Bloom, Canning, and Sevilla 2001; Oliver 2015)[15].

*Figure 2 : Population Pyramid, 1935-2019*




Source: (MIAFC 2021)

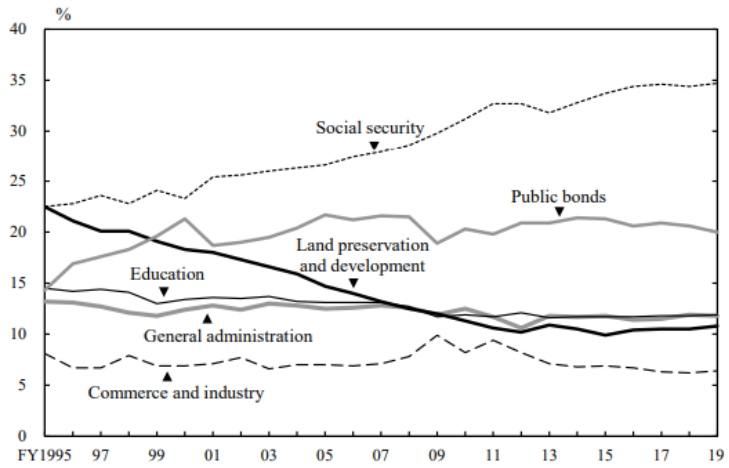
Three major, undesirable economic imbalances arise in the PDT which have social implications: i) ageing, which increases economic dependency due to the older, more dependent population and as such is at the top of national concerns; ii) regional imbalances, which include regionally differentiated processes of localised shrinkage and the risk of population sorting (i.e. when the young and educated migrate leaving behind concentrations of elders) producing different policy needs, and; iii) a lower GDP, which constitutes a problem for large-scale investments or national programmes (Lutz and Gailey 2020; Oros 2020). A fourth dimension could also consider how the industrial structure is configured to meet the population's needs, as in the future industrial policies might be needed to regulate entry and exit of firms in booming and declining sectors (Kishida and Nishiura 2018). Such strain of the literature is rather neglected in the literature on demography and economic changes, but not lost to Japanese policy makers, who believe that demographic decline offers opportunities to review the industrial structure (*Highlighting Japan* 2018).

Looking at Japan's ageing society, it is clear that the public bill is rising, and attempts to counteract this are growing in importance. What catches the eyes of the Japanese economists and policy makers is that in 2040, welfare spending is forecast to account for 25 percent of the GDP, from

[15] Obviously, the challenges of the post-demographic transition have also important social and political implications, touching upon fertility rates and support for families (Coulmas 2007; OECD 2021a; UN 2015; Yashiro 2002), loneliness and social isolation (Suzuki, Dollery, and Kortt 2021; Takagi and Saito 2015), the emergence of the 'silver democracy' and intergenerational conflicts (Turner 1989; Traphagan 2008; Okazawa et al. 2019; Umeda 2022; Kweon and Choi 2021).

21.5 of 2018 (Table 6), as approximately one out of three people will be 65+, and, of those, one out of four will be 85+ (Nikkei 2018; OECD 2020a). Whereas there are contrasting findings as to how an ageing population relates to growth (Oliver 2015), scholars converge on pointing at the decrease of the working population as the largest source of worry for the future (Bloom et al. 2011). Simply put, there are not enough people to support spending in social provision, and so productivity and participation in the labour market must be improved to partially compensate for the deficit. How to do so is the question.

*Table 6: Ratio of Net Total National and Local Expenditures by Function*




Source: (MIAFC 2021)

There are different ways in which productivity can be affected, and the economic literature on this concern is as abundant as heavily quantitative and positivist[16]. Keeping the tone light and related to demographic changes, between 2000 and 2015, increases in productivity growth were neutralised by a decrease in the labour force (Jorgenson 2016) — which explains why so much attention has been going towards increasing the latter's numbers. Recent reports are more optimistic and notice that Japan has been able to continue to grow by increasing participation in the workforce in a condition of depopulation, even if at this pace the country is projected to achieve full employment by 2027 (PWC 2019). In particular, major achievements have been gained in terms of elders' and women's participation in the workforce (Clark et al. 2010). Today, Japan enjoys the third highest average effective rate of retirement among OECD countries, standing at almost 71 years old between 2013-2017 (OECD 2018). Women employment rates too are above the OECD average, despite the perseverance of the gender-gap in what can still be defined as a man-dominated society, with women being excluded from high-paying, executive

[16] On the demand side, see: (Fukao et al. 2016; Haghirian 2015b; Noble 2017); on the supply side, see: Shinada (2011), (Judzik and Sala 2015); on wedges, see: (Schoppa 2008; Ono and Odaki 2011) (Schoppa 2008; Haghirian 2015a, (Fukao 2010; see also: K. Shimizu 2014).

positions, and regular employment (OECD 2017a). Despite these improvements, the expectations of labour shortages still loom large.

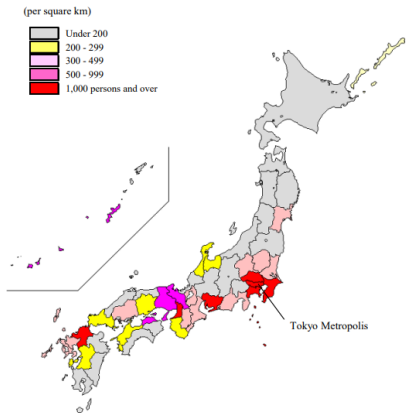
Although (im)migration is excluded when talking about demographic transitions because it is not treated as a natural (i.e., endogenous to the country) change in the population, it features prominently in the economic measures against depopulation (and labour shortages). Recently, Japan has taken strong measures and relaxed its strict immigration policies, officially doing so to face the demographic crisis and as a pro-business measure. The last round of reforms undertaken is expected to bring to Japan an additional 345000 foreign workers, in an immigration system that has been defined as '*à la carte* globalisation, where Japan custom-orders a labour force in the 14 sectors where they are most urgently needed' (Gelin 2020). In 2020, 2.5 percent of Japan's working population was composed by foreign workers (*Al Jazeera* 2021). The high concentration of migrants in blue collar or low-paid positions is a contentious point for those who do not see immigration as a solution to demographic changes through integration policies which allow migrants to become full members of society, but rather as a way to retain uncompetitive firms operating in the Japanese market (Yashiro 2002). Although increasing the population 'artificially' through migration might help cope or at least give respite to struggling socio-economies, foreign workers are often seen as the last resort to cope with the PDT, as immigration remains an unpalatable political option for the general public (Green 2017; Stokes and Devlin 2018).

A last area related to productivity relates to automation, Japan being deemed the leading country for its potential to expand automation (Horii and Sakurai 2020). The role of technology in the Japanese demographic context seems to defy conventional knowledge applied to high-income countries such as the US in a positive direction. IMF economists have found Japan to be exceptional, in that the negative sides of automation, especially displacement, income polarisation and rising inequality, do not manifest in the country because 'labor [is] literally disappearing and dim [are the] prospects for relief through higher immigration' (Schneider, Hong, and Le 2018, 31). The authors continue to state, however, that the positive outcomes of automation are not painless nor evenly distributed. Outside the manufacturing sector, it is still unclear what labour saving, complementing, or substituting technologies will be introduced, despite the fact that it is the service sector that lags behind in productivity in Japan. One of the few studies bringing evidence from the service sector tackles nursing care homes (Eggleston, Lee, and Iizuka 2021), where robot adoption has been conspicuously subsidised by the national and prefectural governments to remedy labour shortages. The study concludes that these new technologies do not reduce jobs but *increase* them by changing the quality of work through flexibility, which in turn allows the inclusion of non-regular employees and part-time jobs. Hence, the interpretation on the role of technology is open, depending on whether its use is meant as a

remedy to labour shortages because there are *no* people available or whether it is used to allocate labour more efficiently so that more work can be done with limited labour (or any balance between these suppositions). A second undesirable side effect of automation is its gender effect, as jobs to be fully replaced tend to be those where women are employed (Nobuaki and Kondo 2018). Finally, the decrease in tax revenues (one of the reasons why Bill Gates called for a robot tax) essentially does little to improve the ageing-related balance sheet (Schneider, Hong, and Le 2018).

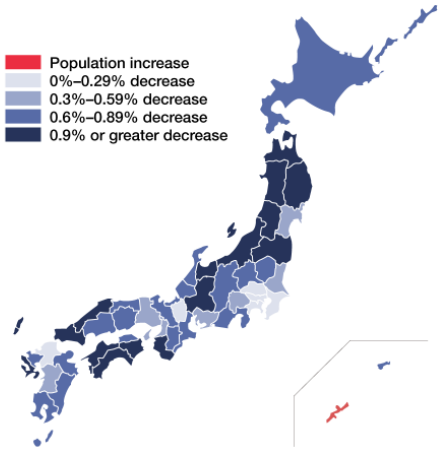
The PDT has different regional conformations. Demographic changes are not displayed evenly within countries and, one could argue, there are deferred times as to when and how they would hit different places (Figure 3 and 4). This was a central point of the famous book 'Local Extinctions', also known as the Masuda Report after the name of the author, published in Japan in 2014[17].

Figure 3: *Population* Density




Source : (MIAFC 2021)

Figure 4: Rate of Population Change



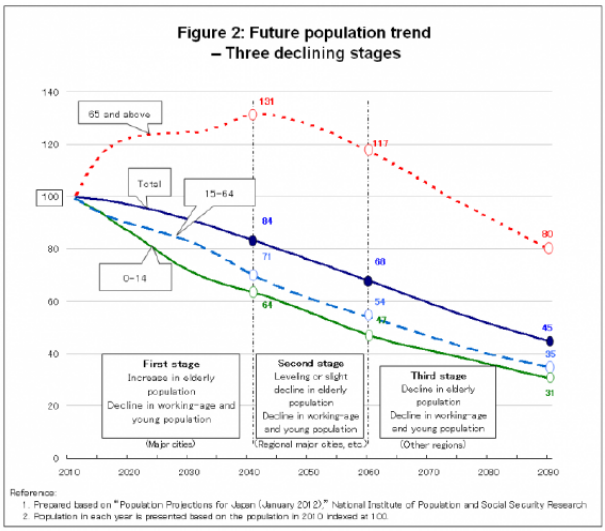

Source : (*Nippon.Com* 2022)

Deep decline in Japan has already started in regional socio-economies, but it does not stop there: it keeps crunching. Masuda's most prominent points of focus were three. Firstly, he noticed that Japan's regions are at different points of the three-stage population decline and this is linked to outmigration and employment opportunities (Figure 5); secondly, he remarked that age-selective migration has worsened not only the reproductive capacity of regional and local socio-economies, but the overall reproductive capacity of the nation. Families in regional areas tend to have more children than those in major cities. When the youth, and especially women aged 20 to 32, migrate, they affect both the departing and arriving destination's futures. The faster the decrease in

[17] To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the book has not been officially translated in English. Nonetheless, the author published an extensive English version, which includes relevant tables and estimations and which was retrieved in the Japan Foreign Policy Forum (Masuda 2014).

numbers of this category, the faster the pace of decline of a place is. Finally, he expected migration to the major metropoles to continue (Masuda 2014; JFS 2015).

Figure 5: Future Population trend – Three Declining Stages




Source: (Masuda 2014)

In this view, ignoring regional socio-economies is not a bad *territorial* policy: it is a bad *national* policy. From the set of observations above, Masuda concluded that neither macro-policies nor decentralisation will prevent further escalation of the problem, as the former has already expanded the disparity in regional tax revenues and the latter has been focused only on public spending and physical infrastructure. Rather, *the focus should be on people and on efforts to maintain or increase the population*, such as policies to support marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and childcare, reallocation through incentives for regional in-migration, and training and acquisition of human resources to foster the capacity of localities. What Masuda takes as necessary for Japan's future is the basis by which resilience is defined in the research: even though demographic changes are not the root problem, solving or alleviating them is the only alternative for regional areas to avoid becoming ghost cities.

Nevertheless, Masuda's attention clearly focused substantially on social investments by the state, with the belief that it is the best way to support, in turn, the economy and the general wellbeing of Japan. It is important to notice that the way the literature on the demographic transition reasons is rather the opposite, and one shared by policy makers: rather than curing economic problems through society, curing societal problems through the economy. This reasoning is evident when looking at the solutions proposed by the state to cope with demographic changes and the new roles in the Japanese political economy.

### 2.2.2 State's solutions and efforts for the Post Demographic Transition

When Abenomics was announced in 2012 to relaunch the Japanese economy (OECD 2017b), the Japan Revitalisation Strategy (JRS) became the organising plan to achieve growth while contemporaneously tackling demographic challenges (Ito 2021). Through this ambitious plan, the state was meant to prepare Japan and the Japanese economy for the coming of the hyper-aged society and the challenges of falling birth-rates. While it is not possible to fully review the wide agenda covered by Abenomics or the JRS, the emphasis is on how the Japanese state decided to cope with demographic challenges [18].

#### *2.2.2.1 Reforming work styles as a solution for demographic challenges*

One of the major areas of interest for the state to tackle demographic changes has been work (Hayashi 2021). Reforming work gained ground under the Abe administration and the Work Style Reform (*hatarakikata kaikaku,* hereafter WSR), after a number of uncomfortable observations raised doubts about the current state of Japanese working practices and their effects on family decision-making. For instance, non-regular male employees have been found much less likely than regular workers to get married by their 30s, and the lowest number of children per couple is when the woman is the breadwinner (Moriguchi and Ono 2017; Gordon 2017; Vogel 2021). Similarly, the state needed to push greater gender equality to raise the low birthrate while including women in a labour market where the job opening to applicants ratio is at 1.6 (Jones and Seitani 2019). As stated by Dalton, the official interest in gender equality is thus to be interpreted through the logic by which 'by having more women in the workforce, not only will the GDP rise, the fertility rate might also rise, and the problems associated with a declining working population resulting from the ageing society will also be addressed'(2017, 97). The same rationale might also be applied to elders, where flexibility in working hours might improve their inclusion in the labour market for longer term and decrease social provision spending. The hope is then to be able to create a virtuous circle whereby 'better' working practices would allow people to find more space for living.

In particular, the dual structure of the Japanese employment system came under attention. This structure distinguishes between lifetime employment, made mostly of men enjoying high security and usually provided by large enterprises (Moriguchi and Ono 2017; Gordon 2017; Ono 2010), and a disposable, precarious and underpaid army of non-regular employees, disproportionately made of women and the youth (Vogel 2021; Kojima, North, and Weathers 2017). Before the

[18] For a review on Abenomics see: Vogel (2021), Honma and George-Mulgan (2018). Refer to Hoshi and Lipscy (2021) for a full evaluation of the Abenomics agenda.

recession, non-regular employment disproportionately took place in SMEs, but was greatly expanded in the 1990s and early 2000s (Shimizu 2014; Vogel 2021). The surge in non-regular jobs, from 15 percent in 1982 to 38 in 2014, has been deemed the most remarkable change in Japanese working life since the 1960s, and it came largely at the expense of regular jobs and self-employment (Gordon 2017; see also: Jones and Seitani 2019).

Hence, the WRS came to prioritise two problems, the long work hours and the grossly unequal wage gaps between regular and non-regular workers (Kojima, North, and Weathers 2017). For all its fanfare, the main reforms actually implemented are, however, limited to restricting the amount of overtime, the mandatory requirement to take at least five days of annual leave, and the promotion of extending employees' retirement to the age of 70 (OECD 2020b). For women, companies are encouraged to hire them in higher positions, but the main recipe for their inclusion in the workforce is still the cut in overtime (Dalton 2017).

As the WSR mostly includes non-binding recommendations, it is really up to companies to decide their uptake. The state is relying on market competition to raise the quality of work, as companies are forced to compete for labour among themselves. While the state believes that the demographic and economic challenges can be revolutionised through a change in working styles, the expectations are that the private sector will be ready to implement new 'pro-labour' measures, exceeding those that it proposed.

#### *2.2.2.2 State for the environment, companies for the substance*

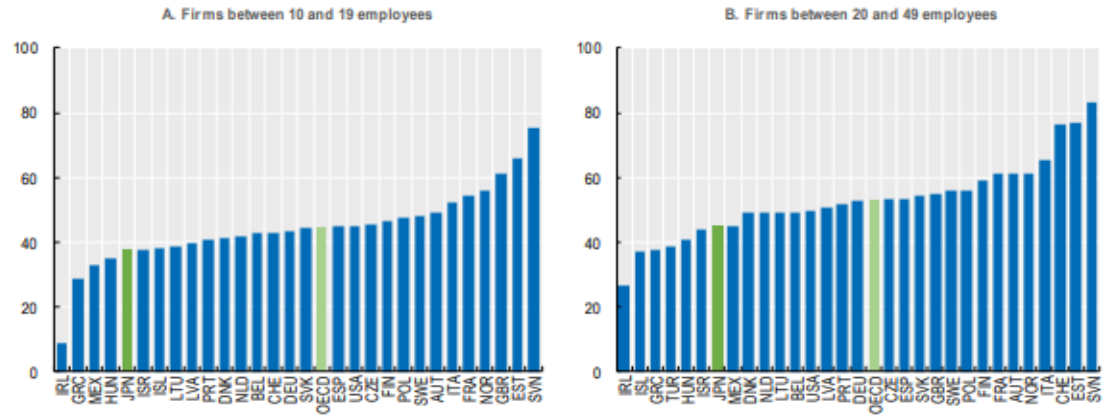
Demographic changes are not only altering the socio-economy. They are helping to reshape, or justifying the reshape of, roles in the political economy. Hence, the state is also remarking that new expectations on SMEs are arising and how in the new Japan, sacrifices will be made.

The Japanese state has been increasingly adopting a selective (dis-and re-) engagement from the socio-economy and promoting the transfer of roles and responsibilities to individuals through the culture of entrepreneurialism and competition. Despite debates on the meaning of neoliberalism (Hashimoto 2014; Elis 2011; Kushida and Shimizu 2013), the majority of the reforms advanced in Japan since the 1980s have been interpreted as a sign of the neoliberal drift of the country, and the JRS fits this direction (Hashimoto 2014), In particular, the state is changing its relationships with enterprises, starting to differentiate among winners and losers, those to be supported and those not.

The dual structure in employment practices in Japan has been mirrored by a division between large companies, headquartered in Tokyo or large urban centres, and the majority of companies spread throughout the territory, (unhelpfully) pulled in together under the label of small and

medium enterprises (SMEs). Large firms are decisively more productive than SMEs (Figure 6), and, from a geographical perspective, labour productivity of SMEs has a strong relationship with the density of the population (SMEA 2019). Large firms are better sources of workers' welfare and benefits. Large capital is not, in short, among the major source of concerns for the government, but rather a partner with which to negotiate.

*Figure 6: The Productivity Gap between SMEs and Large firms*




Source: OECD (2020b)

As for SMEs, the story is different. The Japanese entrepreneurial and corporate milieux display notoriously low entrepreneurship levels (GEM n.d.) and declining numbers in firms' rates (SMEA 2017). Overall, SMEs constitute ca. 99 percent of businesses and 70 percent of total employment (Kuwahara et al. 2015; SMEA 2019) but have nevertheless been neglected in a political economy dominated by big business (Ibata-Arens 2005; Shimizu 2014; Whittaker 1997, 2011). There is too much variety under the categorisation of SMEs to reach significant presentations or conclusions on what they are like, their strengths and weaknesses, their practices, and so forth (Wapshott and Mallett 2016). Such level of detail is moreover rather useless, as the major objective of the state is not to distinguish the content of what SMEs do (although there are industrial policies in that direction), but rather to support them according to their role in the political economy.

As much as there are profitable and/or innovative SMEs, there are those which are neither. In Japan, SMEs had been traditionally treated like a *de facto* replacement for state welfare. Hence, rather than paying for unemployment and social security benefits (which are low in Japan (Schoppa 2006)), the state devised numerous policies to keep firms alive and retain high employment levels. SMEs policy as conceived in the first SME Basic Law in 1963 was based on the view that SMEs were vulnerable entities (Yoshimura and Kato 2007), to be supported by granting easier access to finance, publicly-backed (loans through government-affiliated financial institutions) or privately-backed (credit guarantees) (Shimizu 2014), as well as through

regulatory and trade protection to compensate for the gap with large enterprises or the losses from waves of industrial upgrading (Schoppa 2006). The crises at the end of the 20th Century led to a large downsizing of these financial instruments, and after the revision of the SME Basic Law in 1999, state policies began to change from being protective to targeting innovation and entrepreneurship. SME policies became competition-oriented, as well as a matter of individual municipalities (Uchikawa 2009).

The state still wants to assist 'healthy' SMEs, especially those endangered not by market forces, but by demographic changes. Ageing affects Japan's entrepreneurial climate as SMEs struggle to find inheritors (OECD 2020b), and voluntary closures of otherwise healthy companies are more pronounced in rural areas (Hong et al. 2020), so that numerous programmes for business succession are trying to rescue 'good firms' from disappearing (SMEA 2019). Saving competitive firms is seen as a must for the state because, as the costs of social security rise, the state believes SMEs should start replacing some of its redistributive functions. As shown in Figure 7 from the SME Agency of the Ministry for Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI), four key roles should be fulfilled by SMEs in the contemporary economy: leading Japan's economy, supporting supply chains, revitalising the local economy, and supporting local life and communities. The political philosophy underpinning SME policy discarded the previous 'correction of difference' approach (i.e., devising measures to allow the majority of SMEs to survive) in favour of state support for growth with diversity of outcomes (i.e., allowing failures). In a context of demographic decline, and as labour scarcity brings doom upon the country, providing employment is not a priority anymore — the efficient allocation of labour is.

*Figure 7: Changes in the Direction of SMEs Policies*

**Fig.1** Points of revision in the Small and Medium Enterprises Basic Act (1999 revision)

| | Small and Medium Enterprises Basic Act (before revision) | Small and Medium Enterprises Basic Act (after revision) |
|---|---|---|
| Political philosophy | ○ "Correction of difference" | ○ Provide training and support for diverse and active SMEs (Differences as a result are accepted) |
| Political goal | ○ Productivity improvement (Sophistication of structure in SMEs)<br>○ Improvement of business conditions (Correction of disadvantages in business activities) | ○ Promotion of management reform and establishment of business<br>○ Strengthening of management platforms<br>○ Streamlining the adaptation to economic and social environmental changes<br>(*Voluntary efforts of independent SMEs are assumed) |

**Fig.2** Points of revision in the Small and Medium Enterprises Basic Act (1999 revision)

| | Image of SMEs in the 21st century |
|---|---|
| (1) | Nursery of market competition |
| (2) | Innovators (Provision of diverse finance and services, formation of new relationships for the division of labor) |
| (3) | Providers of attractive working opportunities |
| (4) | Developers of local economies and communities |

**Fig.3** Expected roles of future SMEs (from four viewpoints)

| | "Roles" of SMEs |
|---|---|
| (1) | Role of leading Japan's economy |
| (2) | Role of supporting supply chains |
| (3) | Role of revitalizing local economy |
| (4) | Role of supporting local life and communities |

Source: (SMEA 2019)

On the same line, if before the political aims of SMEs policy were defined as improving productivity and business conditions, the state now focuses on enabling or coordinating functions for which 'voluntary efforts of independent SMEs are assumed' (SMEA 2019, 38). (De/Re-) regulation as a tool for growth and sets of incentives or disincentives thus exceed in importance and quantity transfers of money, and, when financial support is granted to companies, it is more tightly linked to measurable improvements or their final aims, such as purchase of capital equipment to foster productivity or support for newly established companies in terms of subsidies for employment, although the variety and scatteredness of Japanese SMEs measures remains impressive (see, for example, the list in SMEA 2017). Overall, they are meant to distinguish between deserving and less deserving companies. The time of the state as a creator of 'artificial' markets is mostly gone. The new image of SMEs is thus one where competition is healthy and ripe, innovation fostered and actively pursued, and attractive work is made available so as to develop local economies and communities (Figure 7). The actual delivery of the 'revolution in productivity' and the WSR is up to the private sector (Cabinet Office 2015).

While not prescriptive in terms of action, the state has clearly distanced itself from its previous modus operandi to sanction that state intervention in the economy will be *qualitatively* different from the past. The expectations on private economic agents are thus high, and it needs to be considered how exactly they are supposed to fulfil their new roles – if they perceive them as their own responsibilities, or what advantage they would gain by embracing their new roles, or if they are feasible. As if erasing the past of places or companies' histories and endeavours, the suggestion of the state for companies is rather vague: change management practices and the relationship between labour and capital.

# 3. Methodological Underpinnings

As it was seen in the previous chapters, the research aims to answer two research questions: To what extent can the state shape rural resilience? To what extent can private economic agents shape rural resilience? This chapter tackles the various aspects concerning the research philosophy of the study and how these two questions have been operationalised.

Firstly, the chapter introduces the methodological underpinnings of the research. The first section introduces the research strategy. The study adopts a case study design, with much attention devoted to embedding and clarifying how notions of the rural are embedded in the case. In order to explain the construction of the case, it introduces the three steps and a half taken to delimit the case and specifies how companies are grouped.

The second section explains selected concepts and notion of critical realism (CR). After a brief review of the basic tenets of CR, the section illustrates why, in CR as in the research project, it is important to keep the analytical distinction between structure and agency, as it avoids the conflation of the capacities of the state and private economic agents to shape rural resilience. It also explains how the Realist Evaluation Framework (REF) complements approaches to the rural to organise the investigation on the theories of rural revitalisation proposed by the state.

Secondly, the chapter focuses on more operational aspects, such as the methods for data collection and analysis, placing particular emphasis on some traits of research practice which relate to the challenges of doing fieldwork in Japan, in the hope that it will contribute to a better understanding of doing international research as a non-native speaker. The research used mixed qualitative methods, document analysis and semi-structured interviews to collect data and thematic analysis to process the data. The sampling technique used is selective sampling, while recruitment took place through gate keepers. Other sections explore the limitations of the study.

## 3.1 Research strategy: constructing a case on state, private economic agents and the rural

The research strategy adopted is the case study design. Case studies enable both intensive and extensive studies which help identify and validate the causes of a given phenomenon and reveal the way mechanisms operate, and allow researchers to explore the social world in-depth, using various resources to tackle ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Yin 2011). Case studies can be used to produce meaningful observations which extend beyond the case itself. Constructing a case on how rural resilience can be built by state and private economic agents has been a focal point of the research because of the need to take into consideration the concept of the rural.

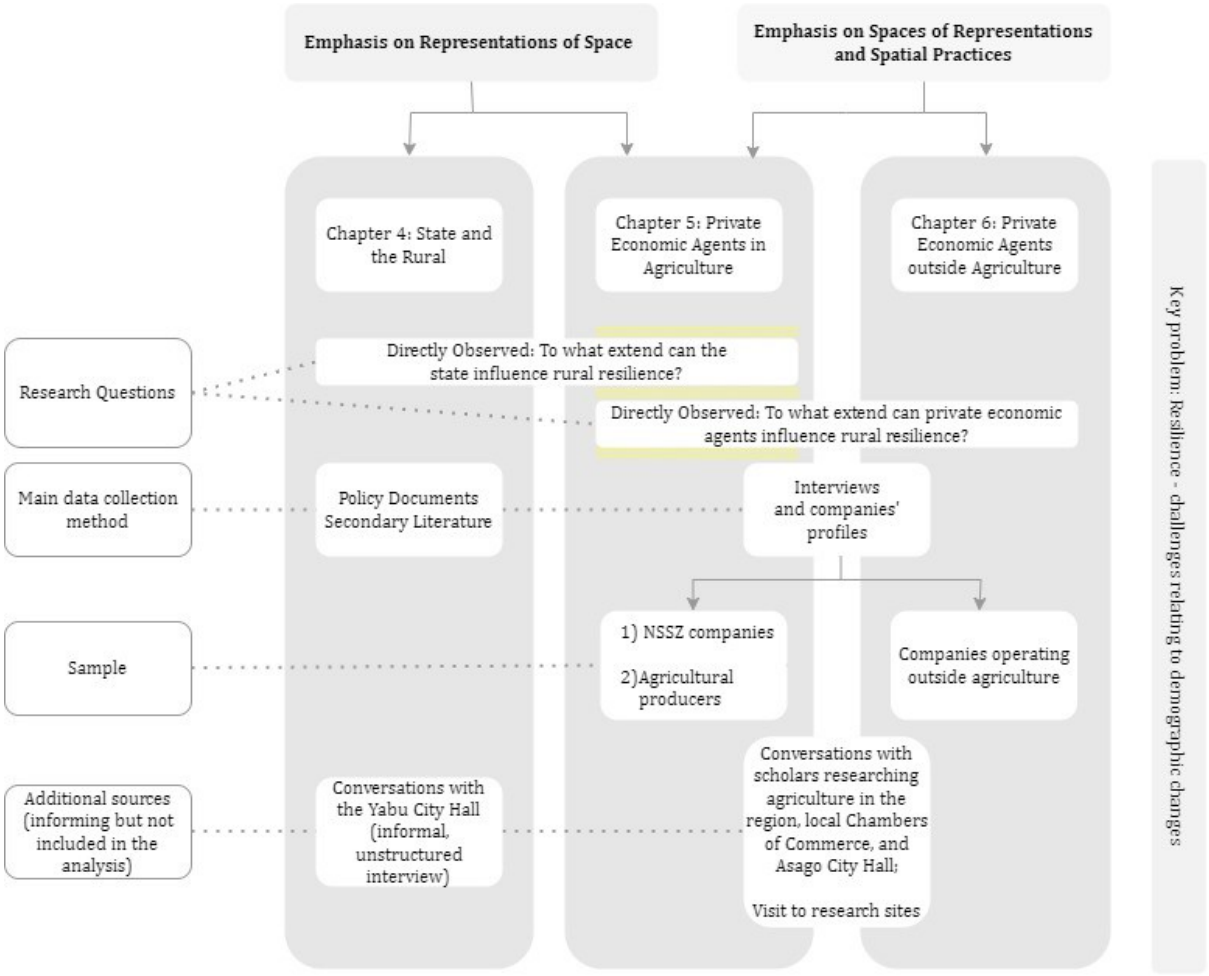
### 3.1.1 A three steps and a half strategy

Choosing the research site has been one of the most important phases in the research. Undeniably, previous knowledge about Japan helped choosing it as a country of reference: its rapid depopulation, especially of the conventionally defined rural, has hit the headlines multiple times, and the majority of North-East Asian scholars would be aware of the situation considering that important demographic changes are similarly unfolding in countries such as China, South Korea and Taiwan, but also Italy or several countries in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, approximately one out of two of Japan's municipalities (896 out of 1800) are at risk of vanishing by 2040 (Hosomi 2015; JFS 2015), giving fifty percent chances that a random selection would return a site relevant in terms of problem, albeit not necessarily a 'rural' one. As the concept of the rural is so flawed, and the problem so widespread, how can one approach the selection of a site and build a case on rural resilience building?

Hoggart gave a simple answer: avoid pragmatic approaches to study site selection and focus on the theoretical questions of the research. In the theorisation of human activity, it is the 'understanding between social structures and the mechanisms through which structures are translated into action (and the autonomy human agency has from structural factors)' that matters (Hoggart 1990, 245). Strictly speaking, the position adopted in the research is that the concept of rural, as an analytical category, is unable to generate any fruitful insights about the workings of any socio-economy which can be generalised across spaces. As a researcher, the sites chosen are localities as any others, while obviously being different from all of them.

Nonetheless, this is not only a case through which to observe how demographic changes are dealt with, but also a case about state and private economic agents *and* their ability to shape the rural or be shaped by it, which advances that the creation of resilience depends on the establishment of a dialogue between different actors and entities. The case delimited the sphere of observation, while the rural comfortably sat as a question mark, waiting to gain meaning from the interpretations of state and private economic agents. There is no necessity to pre-define the rural if exploiting, as Halfacree (2006) noted, the concept of the rural as including social representations, and so the emphasis has been on the search of a case of state intervention in a socio-economy that would be defined as 'rural' by the state and start expanding from this point to include opportunities to study private economic agents' ideas and actions. As shown in Figure 8, representing a simplified research map, the case and the division of the findings chapter are organised around Lefebvre's spatial triad, which focuses on the perspective of those who create space. More details are provided below.

Figure 8: Research Map




*Step 1: identifying state intervention in the rural*

What needed to be captured was a set of circumstances where the perspective endorsed by the research could be matched against those who *actually are shaping rural resilience*, *starting from their perspective* and the causal powers they possess. As it was seen, the first research question is: *To what extent can the state shape rural resilience?* The first step in the research was thus to identify an instance of state intervention, trying to grasp the representations of the rural space proposed by the state and how they emerge. Such a process meant skimming several documents and resulted in the identification of the Japan Revitalisation Strategy (JRS) as the core text to be analysed. The JRS contained a theory of the rural advanced by the state as well as how it should be applied through the introduction of National Strategic Special Zones (NSSZs), thus providing sound conditions to approach the study of conceived space and how abstract space attempts to homogenise concrete space.

Among the NSSZs, two main sites were undoubtedly defined as rural socio-economies by the state: Yabu city, in Hyōgo Prefecture, and Semboku city, in Akita. Yabu city was chosen as a research

site, mostly because it was a forerunner launched during the first round of the NSSZ, and, a serendipitous event, because of the proximity to the Kobe University. Although different reforms were programmed in Yabu and Semboku, in both research sites the focus of state intervention was agriculture — a sectoral type of intervention. The core target sample, constituted by the 13 companies participating in the NSSZs, was then derived.

The sample included in this phase is quite peculiar in terms of relation to the overarching research question, as can be visualised by the overlapping research questions in the Research Map above (Figure 8). On the one hand, being derived from the notion of rural and efforts to build rural resilience by the state, it concretises an instance of the actual making of the rural through state intervention: how it unravels, what it brings to the table, and what it includes. This is the conceived rural, a representation of space. It complements the research question on how the state defines and acts upon rural resilience, by adding the knowledge and experience of those who are the channels for the realisation of state's aims and the major beneficiaries of state intervention.

On the other hand, participants have their own agency and their own relationship with the local territory. It is their interpretations and actions that bring change on the ground. Their lived experiences will be complex, and their knowledge and practice of the rural space will influence how they produce and reproduce space. The rural will be their space of representations, and the place where old and new spatial practices are displayed. Hence, analysis of this sample of companies, their understanding and behaviour, also contributes to answer the second research question: To what extent can private economic agents shape rural resilience*?*

*Step 2: expansion of the sample to agricultural companies outside NSSZ*

The second step was rather simple: adding other agricultural companies which would give a sense of whether and how the type of intervention promoted might influence existing players. Together with the sample of the NSSZ, this group of companies gives an idea on how the agricultural sector, seen as the encounter between state vision and participants' vision, might work towards building rural resilience. Even within the agricultural sector, differences can be substantial. This means that the state might be promoting notions of agriculture which will be contested by people operating in agriculture, and that resistance to the state's project might arise. On the contrary, it is also possible that the state puts forward a vision which is shared by agricultural producers. Hence, it should be noted that the two samples give different nuances to the meaning of state intervention in shaping agricultural practices – the NSSZ sample being imbued with a sense of collective desirability, the non-NSSZ agricultural sample being more amply characterised by lack of attention, neglect or even opposition.

*Step 3: expansion of the sample to capture the complexity of rural socio-economies*

The third step was yet another expansion of the sample, meant to capture the locality (or the rural) as more than the agricultural sector. Because, for the scope of the research, resilience building is defined as those attempts to alleviate the worst consequences of demographic changes, efforts can arise from a multitude of players. If so far only the conception of the rural stemming from the state was considered, building the case around state intervention does not mean preferring the concept of the rural provided by it over alternative ways to see the rural, hence accepting that the most powerful actors have a unique right to define space, or endorsing the definition of desirability they provide. Rather, the case concentrates on the actions of those who are held responsible in making, at their scale and with their capacities and their limitations, the rural resilient, relating rather than comparing capacities. If the state's definition of the rural revolves around agriculture, so that agricultural companies appear as particularly key for the future of these socio-economies, the doubts stemming from the literature made it so that any place can be treated as a locality, whose features should be derived by the reality of the site itself. Part of this reality is produced and reproduced through every private economic agent's behaviours and understandings, how they perceive spaces and mould them through their practices.

Private economic agents in other sectors then can influence rural resilience, too. Therefore, the sample was enlarged to include companies from other sectors of the local socio-economy. Four sectors were selected based on their shares in local employment obtained from the Future Chart collaborative project on local capital stocks by the Chiba University in Japan (Oposum, n.d.): manufacturing, construction, welfare, and services. These sectors are, as much as agriculture, foreseen to present substantial changes in the near future, reminding that the overall local economic fabric is changing. If expanding the sample to other sectors serves to show the variety and complexity of the locality as seen from participants' perspective, it also shows the limits of state intervention and its (dis)connection with the needs of these socio-economies. Hence, while in the finding chapter the two sub-questions 'how do Japanese private economic agents located in rural areas consider their environment in which they operate', and, secondly, 'how do private economic agents act upon the local socio-economic environment' are confronted, implicitly, as the negative impression of a picture, the capacity of the state to influence rural resilience is also investigated.

*Half step: from shadow case to region*

Finally, an unaccomplished step (the 'half' step of the title) concerned the choice of a shadow case. As described by Hancké, shadow cases are meant to 'make smaller, more focused bilateral comparisons on relevant dimensions. […] A *shadow case* …does not entail a full-fledged case study, but helps … explore — "in the shadow" of the other cases — what was not entirely conclusive from the initial design' (2009, 75–76). Initially, one of the doubts was whether state intervention

would somehow influence the localities differently, for instance, by interacting with local social institutions in particular ways or by creating competition, collaboration, or forms of imitation from other localities. The idea was to use another site as a shadow case. Hence, participants from a neighbouring city of Yabu, Asago, were also included in the research, following the inductive approach which amply characterises the construction of the case. Nonetheless, no major differences appear *from the interviews with private economic agents* other than the fact that in Asago the agricultural sector is supported by the local government and local businesses in forms of bottom-down initiatives. There were initial attempts to explore these dimensions by collecting interviews and materials from other stakeholders. Preliminary conversations in the form of unstructured interviews were carried out with the City Halls and Chambers of Commerce in Yabu and Asago to understand the directions of local socio-economic planning, and scholars from the Kobe University with first-hand experience in the NSSZ were approached for comments and elucidations on what the programme was about. Nonetheless, these efforts were discontinued because they would require a more systematic approach and further fieldwork. Because the COVID-19 pandemic made access to these sources overwhelmingly difficult, the line of inquiry was dropped. Further data would be needed to answer these open questions.

Faced with the doubt of whether to include or not participants in the research, the choice was to include participants from Asago, too. Participants in the two research sites shared not only similar experiences, but also important knowledge about their neighbours, commenting for example on state intervention in Yabu, both with admiration and suspicion. These sites can also be understood in terms of belonging to the same region, the Tajima region. The position is that by removing the interviews, the loss of information would be more substantial than the overall clarity gained by focusing only on one site. Consequently, the interviews with participants from Asago are included in the relevant sections.

### *3.1.2 Specifying what is defined as the agricultural sector*

There are two main groups of companies in the research, for which findings are presented separately. These are respectively, companies operating in agriculture, the sector subject to state intervention (directly or indirectly), and companies operating in other sectors, which will be referred to as the heterogeneous sample. As companies were asked to self-report their industry and sector of operations and indeed were invited to take part in the research based on their sector of reference, the task of assigning companies to groups might appear straightforward. There are, however, important qualitative caveats as to why self-reporting is not the criterion used to group companies and instead only NSSZ companies and agricultural businesses involved in farming as a primary activity are considered as belonging to the agricultural sector.

Sectoral divisions are blurry when qualitative data is involved. Agriculture is deeply embedded in the local socio-economic fabric of the two sites, and one of the emerging features of the overall sample is pluriactivity, the fact that several local companies operate simultaneously in various sectors, shifting the emphasis of their operations during the year based on multiple factors, such as winning bids or the seasonality of the workflow. Surely, the majority of the participants interviewed were involved in agriculture and farming in different ways, such as suppliers of agricultural machinery, distributors of agricultural products or buyers and producers of agricultural inputs (e.g., food producers), or alternatively as a hobby, a secondary activity, or a social activity.

The way some participants self-reported their sector was not always congruent to what was discussed as the main operation of the company during the interview. One such case is, for example, Participant 34, a rice producer, food manufacturer, and constructor. While the participant self-reported the company's operations as belonging to agriculture, given the freedom to decide what to discuss in the conversation, the focus was on the manufacturing operations, with agriculture and construction only marginally mentioned. On the contrary, Participant 2 coherently self-reported and discussed the manufacturing operations as the core of the business, but, as a participant in the NSSZ for agricultural reform, was invited to elaborate on the agricultural operations.

Things get even more complicated if attempting to approach the notion of Sixth Industry (or AFFinnovation, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Innovation), promoted by the state as a measure to support income growth in agriculture in Japan, or agriculture as conceived in the NSSZ. In theory, the Sixth Industrialisation starts from agricultural producers, and especially farmers, who then move along the agricultural value chain towards manufacturing and/or distribution (Yonekura 2021). Extractive activities such as forestry can also count as forms of Sixth Industrialisation when companies' operations include the transformation of raw materials into production inputs (from primary to secondary industry) or small consumer products. Under such a definition, Participant 8, a wood chip manufacturer who started from self-employment in a family business, should be inserted into the agricultural group. Some food companies, such as Participant 32, adopt a loose notion of Sixth Industry. While not necessarily moving from agriculture to other sectors as a linear progress from primary to secondary and tertiary sector, they closely associate themselves to agricultural producers based on their close cooperation with farmers. As to the definition of agriculture for the NSSZ, this too might be confusing: some manufacturing companies (e.g., Participant 38) were approached to be part of the NSSZ by the local government, and, hence, had they accepted the offer, they would have somehow fulfilled the

broad notion of agricultural sector as seen from the perspective of the state. As the participant refused, its status is as a manufacturer.

Hence, without the intention of denying the complex reality of relationships that are built within people and the economy in the localities studied or to override participants' own knowledge and perception of their operations, the arbitrary decision was made to include in the findings on agriculture only farming operations where food is produced and NSSZ companies, which by definition are operating in the agricultural sector. This is a discretionary choice which takes as its basis the direct engagement of such companies in agricultural production, which, as seen in the literature review, has some peculiarities.

The rest of the sample, called the heterogeneous sample, is larger, as it includes companies from all the other sectors in both localities. This means that the findings are occasionally more summative or less fine-grained. When interpreting data, participants in the agricultural sector could be divided in very small, cohesive groups, while in the heterogeneous sample groups were formed inter-sectorally, based on some characteristics or patterns. There are good reasons why agriculture is treated in more detail: when agriculture as the rural and a sector of intervention is the object of inquiry, the theory proposed by the state has to be tested.

Having delineated the design of the case study, frameworks are needed to understand how such complexity will be organised for the interpretation and discussion of the findings. In order to do so, the critical realist literature is explored.

## 3.2 Supporting the research: Critical Realism

Critical realism (hereafter, CR) is the philosophical, meta-theoretical paradigm with the closest affinity to the research. Its '"middle ground" status' (McLachlan and Garcia 2015) allows to deal with the degree of complexity stemming from the fuzziness of the concept of the rural due to the ramified and interdisciplinary nature of the problem, and, most importantly, the stark differences between state and companies. CR presents a rather complex ontology, asserting that 'much of reality exists and operates independently of our awareness or knowledge of it' (Archer et al. 2016; see also: Jansen 2020; Vincent and O'Mahoney 2018; G. Easton 2010). As a meta-theory, CR does not provide specific indications for how the world should be known: it endorses a relativist epistemology, encouraging 'theoretical pluralism' (Vincent and Wapshott 2014). A central tenet in CR is that 'ontology (i.e. what is real, the nature of reality) is not reducible to epistemology (i.e. our knowledge of reality)'(Fletcher 2017, 182). As advanced by Archer and colleagues, CR 'is not an empirical program; it is not a methodology; it is not even truly a theory, because it explains nothing' (2016). The real is never observable, and hence all knowledge is fallible (Jansen 2020).

### 3.2.1 Structure and agency

Critical realism devotes consistent attention to the relationship between structure and agency and how change takes place. Structure and agency must be separated analytically, because only by considering reflexivity is it possible to understand how structure influences agency and vice versa (Archer 2007). Structure necessarily precedes agency, so that individuals' decisions are subject to the influence of pre-existing social and political configurations (Dobson, Jackson, and Gengatharen 2011; Mutch 2020). On the contrary, structural elaboration, the process through which change takes place, necessarily post-dates the actions that give rise to it (ibid.).

Reflexivity is the property of agents and the defining characteristic of humans, what allows us to deal with society in a world where we are both free and constrained and potentially act upon it (Chernilo 2017; Mutch 2020). A crucial difference between society and individuals, hence applying to entrepreneurs and policy makers but not to the state, is that 'no society or social organisation truly possesses self-awareness, whereas every single (normal) member of society is a self-conscious being' (Archer 2007, 40). Thus, the social world can only be changed by individuals' actions, led by their unspecified, ultimate concerns.

The distinction between structure and agency is relevant to highlight how state and private economic agents can be related. The research treats both the state and private economic agents as potentially acting upon the rural considering their role in the political economy, but it does not attempt to conflate the two, nor does it treat them as incompatible or mutually exclusive. Indeed, they both have, in their roles and powers, distributive or allocative capacities, but of very different types.

The state is 'not merely the specific regime in power at any one moment … but also the basis for a regime's authority, legality, and claim for popular support' (Alford and Friedland 2011, 1), closely associated to the authoritative allocation of values by virtue of its involvement in the socio-economy through policy making and governmental activities (Easton 1957). In the political economy, what is usually observed is the government's action, that is, policymakers' actions influenced by preceding structures. States and governments have a dynamic relationship: governments act within institutional constraints that are inherited, part of which will be part of the history of the state (Hay and Lister 2014; Pempel 2005). They will also use the powers of the state as an entity, its capacity to implement reforms at the national scale, and interpret the role of the same state and its foundational ideas.

The important implication for the research is to recognise that, while the concept of rural might be analytically flawed or useless, it is still possible to find meaningful ways in which it can, as an idea with causal powers and a collective social representation detached from the actual

conditions of socio-economies, work to build up the very future of the latter. Any form of generalisation in the research does not pertain to the empirical findings from fieldwork, which might help describe some features of the localities studied such as those highlighted in the rurality literature but are primarily meant to highlight companies' participation in the making of the local economies. Rather, generalisation mirrors one of the capacities of the state to propose, and, occasionally force, a collective vision of territorial socio-economies and apply measures at whatever scale or according to whatever criteria it deems best or more functional for its purposes.

Clearly, such capacity to impose decisions in extensive ways is far away from the reach of private economic agents. Their distributive role is way more limited in terms of reach, and especially concerns the relationships within the firm, but not a bit less important, as state intervention and causal powers, in all economic systems, needs to pass through their free will. Having wider capacity, or the capacity to act simultaneously upon many places, does not guarantee that the efforts will go towards building rural resilience — these are the empirical questions: to what extent can the state influence rural resilience, and to what extent can private economic agents do the same.

### 3.2.2 The Realist Evaluation Framework

CR also offers useful heuristics to assist in studying policy intervention. Policy intervention is, as seen above, one of the ways in which the state can exert its influence over rural socio-economies. Pawson and Tilley's realist evaluation framework (hereafter, REF) considers policy interventions as theories of social change, whose evaluation tries to capture what works for whom in what context and in what respect (2004, 19; see also: Pawson 1996). This framework is used for a very specific phase, that is, to highlight the process by which the state can shape rural resilience by interacting with social agents.

In the REF, 'programmes are theory incarnate' (Pawson and Tilley 2004, 22). Within each policy intervention, there is a set of assumptions about how change for the better is supposed to take place. Such betterment is envisioned relative to the contingent, existing social systems: 'There is no such thing as a value-free policy: all policy has value-based intent' (Cardno 2018, 624). Hence, programmes are embedded, and much depends for the evaluation on how they are inserted and whether ideas are accepted in (certain) contexts (Pawson and Tilley 2004). Importantly, for change to happen, the beneficiaries of the programme and the programme itself must be active. Leveraging on the reasoning and resources of agents is necessary for the implementation of intervention. Moreover, programmes cannot be wholly isolated or kept constant. Not only the unfolding of intervention will vary with the context (be it social, political, cultural, technological,

and so forth) but programmes can be 'self-transformational', affecting the same circumstances that have first led to their implementation (ibid.).

According to the above set of principles, the REF provides guidance for how programmes should be understood and explained (Pawson and Tilley 2004, passim). The process of policy evaluation entails understanding the mechanisms of the programmes, that is, 'how subjects interpret and act upon the intervention stratagem'; the context of the programme, or those features of the conditions in which programmes are introduced that are relevant to the operation the programme mechanisms'; and the outcomes of programmes, the consequences, intended and unintended, of intervention, that is, the resulting changes brought by mechanisms. The last step is asking under which configurations a programme might work. In the case of the research, these steps are used to guide the inquiry on how state intervention shapes rural resilience in practice. Hence, when investigating state policies, it is possible, for instance, to ask why companies are participating in the NSSZ (mechanisms), what are the particular features which are needed to make companies attracted to rural areas (the context) and whether the stated aim of the intervention chosen can be achieved through the measures designed, therefore inquiring if agriculture is the best way to revitalise rural socio-economies (outcomes) (more details in Section 3.3.2.3).

The major conceptual aspects concerning the research philosophy and the design of the research have been tackled so far. What follows below is how they are operationalised in the study. Hence, the research methods of the study are the subject of the following sections.

## 3.3 Mixing methods: document analysis and semi-structured interviews

Mixed methods can be used for a variety of reasons and in numerous combinations, going beyond the often recognised merits of validation through triangulation or of providing a fuller portrait of a phenomenon (Mason 2006b; Bowen 2009; Doyle, Brady, and Byrne 2009; Molina Azorín and Cameron 2010). In the research, mixed methods are used with a multidimensional logic 'to focus on how different dimensions and scales of social existence intersect or relate, [and to] explore, rather than feel inconvenienced by, how it is that what we might think of as primarily micro or macro domains are shifting and fluid categories, and are in perpetual interplay' (Mason 2006a, 15). The two main methods used are presented below.

### 3.3.1 Document analysis: enabling the study of rural resilience as seen and practised by the state

Document analysis, an umbrella term distinguishing several approaches (Morgan 2022; Gross 2018), has been defined as 'a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents …

material' (Bowen 2009, 27). Although underestimated as a stand-alone research tool (McCulloch 2004; Morgan 2022; Ahmed 2010), document analysis can be used to inform the next stages of research, to appreciate the micro-, meso-, and macro-level, and to grasp the complexity of the context (Price et al. 2021). For the scope of the research, the method is applied to start inquiring about the influence that the state can have on rural resilience, with the relevant findings presented in Chapter 4. Two key aspects are considered concerning this method. Firstly, the retrieval and nature of the documents analysed, and secondly the type of analysis carried out.

#### *3.3.1.1 Which documents? Retrieval and nature of the documents*

Choosing which documents to analyse parallels what would be sampling criteria for interviews or other methods (Tight 2019b). Such selection exercise was of particular relevance for the scope of the study considering the risks to pre-impose notions of rural to specific places. What needed to be chosen was *not simply a text but a context* (McCulloch 2004), an environment with multiple connections which would function as a gate to identify and access a specific 'rural' research site. The document would also need to reflect, to the maximum extent possible, a manifestation of the state perspective on the issues under study. Hence, the selection of the core documents to be analysed can be seen as a dual process: the definition of a context, which is to be understood more broadly in relation to the political economic environment and in relation to one or more theories of (rural) space, and the definition of a set of texts, whose substance can be subject to more methodical analysis to understand the way the state defines and acts upon the rural and rural resilience.

*The JRS as a context*

The iterative process of looking for a case where an instance of direct state intervention could be observed simultaneously to the agency of private economic actors to study resilience-building meant defining several inclusionary and exclusionary criteria (Gross 2018) to construct the possibility to answer the research questions, requirements which needed to be embedded in the document (Table 7). As seen in the literature review, policies affecting rural socio-economies are often scattered, and each policy might have disproportionate effects on territorially bounded socio-economies[19]. Consequently, it is important to understand how the skimming process took place.

The starting source to retrieve recent policies was the Japan territorial review by the OECD (2016), a comprehensive overview collecting the most important territorial plans, policies, and

[19] Think, for example, about the Yellow Vests in France, where a tax on fuel led to massive protests by non-urban citizens.

measures taking place in the country. Among the various policy documents, the Japan Revitalisation Strategy met all the criteria and hence became the core set of texts to be analysed.

*Table 7: Criteria for the selection of the case study*

| | |
|---|---|
| **1** | State intervention needed to concern a recognised rural area, and explicit references needed to be made to the term in policy documents, so that the concept of the rural as seen from the state perspective could be studied |
| **2** | State intervention would be ongoing and involving companies, considering the focus on agency and distributive capacities in the socio-economy |
| **3** | State intervention would be located at the national level and in the broader context of the political economy rather than at the lower levels of governance (e.g. at the prefectural or municipal level) or at the ministerial level, to limit overrepresentation of particular interests by design (e.g., documents from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)) |
| **4** | Documents would be available in English. |

In relation to the construction of the case, and in particular the need for taking into account the concept of the rural as it unfolds at various levels, it is important to note that the JRS provided for the definition of the rural as well as included references to the NSSZs, physical sites for experimentation of reforms. With respect to frameworks to study the rural, and especially Halfacree's (2006) work, the focus on the JRS thus allowed the identification of the actual sites for research, the 'rural' as defined by the state and the 'rural' as defined by private economic agents.

In the process, other potential documents, such as the Grand Design of National Spatial Development towards 2050 (MLIT 2014), were skim-read and excluded despite clear relevance in terms of topic, as no particular policy involving companies could be identified (hence, it would not be possible to study private economic agents' behaviour and practice) or because measures were promoted directly by the MAFF (with the risk of over-representing, by research design and because of the Japanese institutional framework, the agricultural sector). Issues such as authenticity and credibility of the documents were overcome by relying on policy documents from a reliable source. All the documents were accessible in English directly through the government's website.

*The JRS as a text*

Some important features of the JRS need to be explained to clarify how the document analysis is carried out — or how the JRS functions as a text. Firstly, the JRS is a political document of a precise type. As the name suggests, the JRS is a strategy — a speculative map setting objectives and how

they should be achieved in the short, medium and long term. In general, strategies have been used to create consensus among ministries and departments on how to approach complex matters, informing the legislature about the resource requirements of a policy package, as well as a communication tool for domestic and foreign audiences (Stolberg 2012).

These features can be recognised in the JRS. Sets of policies are not 'objective responses to an agreed problem or problems; rather they are responses, often somewhat speculative, based on a particular perspective' (Tight 2019a). Just as noted in Pawson and Tilley's REF (2004), policies might originate from hypotheses advancing 'inherent assumptions about human behaviour'(O'Connor 2007, 231, cited in: Tight 2019a) and are imbued with normative expectations – either explicitly or implicitly articulated. Hence, what made the analysis of the JRS a particularly interesting starting point for the research is that, as an overall strategy for the growth of Japan as a whole, published by an agency responsible for the overall coordination of policies (the Cabinet Office), partially shielded from the influence of other ministries, it included multiple ways in which the Japanese state defines and acts upon territories through different forms of generalisations and their interactions, which include both the rural as an ideal space and the rural as a concrete space.

However, exactly because of its political nature, both instrumental and visionary, and because of the tendency for these types of documents to conceal, hide, or manipulate information, the JRS as a text presents important limitations which preclude understanding the JRS as a context. To clarify, the JRS is not a single, cohesive document but a 'living' plan revised on an annual basis since 2013 to adjust for new priorities and evaluate progression of previous goals (Table 8). The focus of the research is on the documents published between 2013 and 2016, because these years constitute the most intensive time of deregulatory reforms meant to alter the Japanese political economy within the last two decades and the period where the NSSZs were first presented as one of the primary mechanisms to deliver economic growth. Things of the past have disappeared as the JRS evolved, becoming mentions or being elevated to core points in the following strategies. While there is a possibility to extend the study of the Strategy to post-2016 versions to understand policy change, such endeavour is beyond the scope of the study, mostly because changes at the state level would not necessarily be reflected in the research site.

*Table 8: Abenomics third arrow strategy over time*

| Year | Title | # KPIs(# new) |
|---|---|---|
| 2013 | **Japan Revitalization Strategy: Japan Is BACK** | 24 |
| 2014 | **Japan Revitalization Strategy 2014 Revision: Challenge Towards the Future** | 48 (25) |
| 2015 | **Japan Revitalization Strategy 2015 Revision: Investment into the Future, Productivity Revolution** | 51 (9) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 2016 | **Japan Revitalization Strategy 2016: Towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution** | 60 (14) |
| **2017** | Future Investment Strategy 2017: Reforms Towards Society 5.0 | 60 (13) |
| **2018** | Future Investment Strategy 2018: Transformation Towards "Society 5.0," "Data-Driven Society" | 70 (19) |
| **2019** | Growth Strategy (2019) | 63 (5) |

Strategies considered in bold.

Table from: (Kushida 2022)

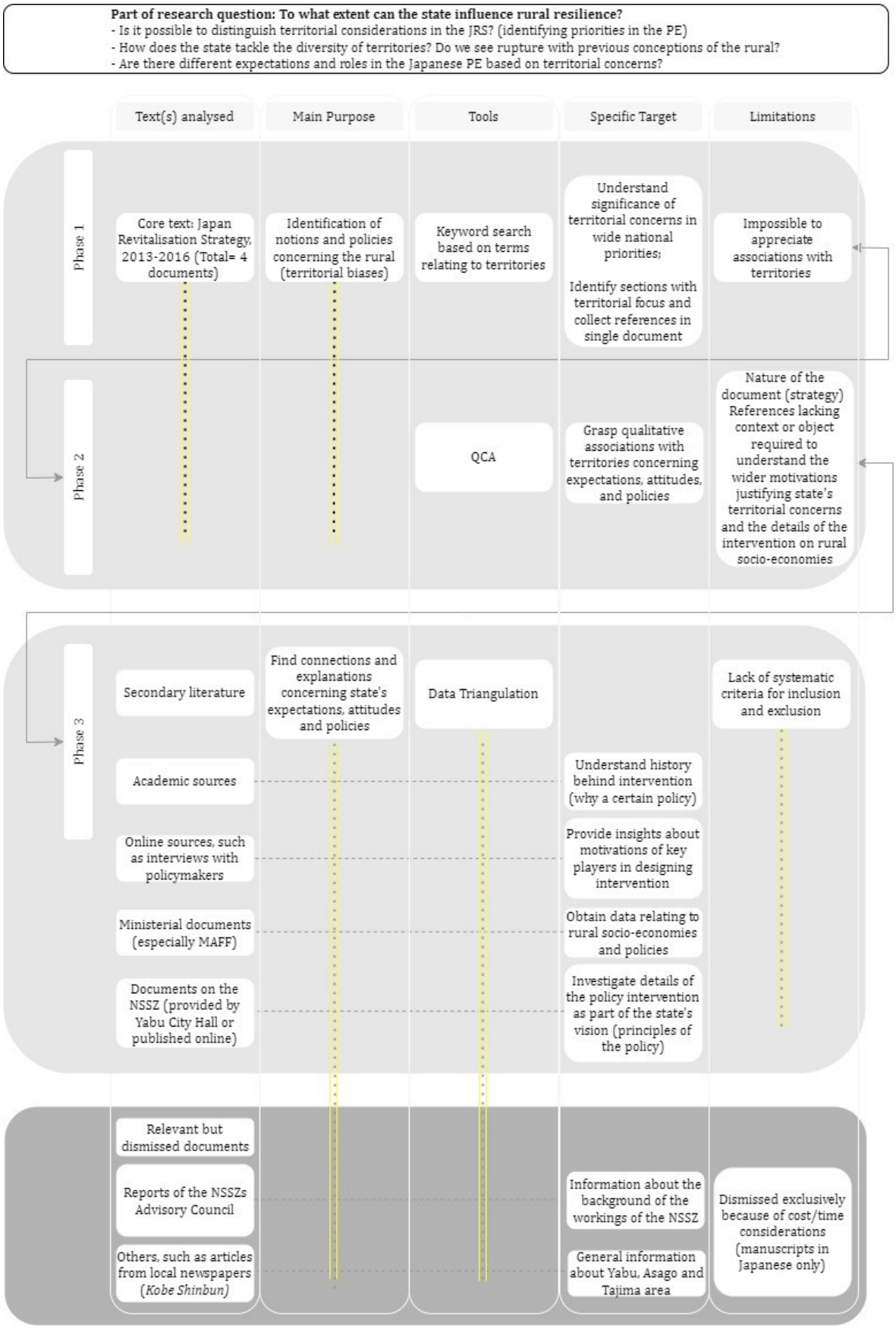
The format of the document has also changed, although broadly speaking all the versions of the JRSs have a narrative part introducing the strategy and the aims of policy items and a monitoring part introducing targets and their state of progression. Cardno (2018) has noted that policy documents are often 'sandwiched', being inserted between the higher-level strategy tier and the operational tier of implementation. The JRS clearly covers important information at the higher level and the policy, but ignores the operational tier. Hence, details about the NSSZ in Yabu, the specific policy instruments and aims of the NSSZ as a centre for agricultural reform in hilly and mountainous areas are not included in the JRS. Such features had implications on how the documents were approached.

#### *3.3.1.2 Appraising the documents: analysis and triangulation*

The complexity of political documents, with their normative, prescriptive, and persuasive functions, attaches to any study on policies the heavy duty of contextualisation, which has an impact on the analysis of textual data. 'Documents do not stand alone"(Atkinson and Coffey 1997, 55, cited in Ahmed 2010, 3) but need to be situated to be understood. They are not complete, and indeed, as hinted above, they do not contain all the necessary information to answer the research questions. Omissions might be purposeful, references broken, missing, or vague, and information which is fundamental for the study might be contained in yet other documents. One cannot disregard, differently said, that an important feature of documents is that they are 'created or recorded without the influence of the researcher and for a purpose other than the research study' (Gross 2018). This is why it is important to recognise the potential and limits of the methods of analysis utilised and how they were overcome through triangulation (Denzin 2012). Figure 9 illustrates the data analysis process, providing the empirical questions leading the inquiry, the texts analysed and their main purpose, the tools used to identify and extract information and the specific tasks they aim at, and the major limitations of each tool.

The first step for data analysis has been qualitative content analysis (hereafter, QCA). Amstrong described QCA as a 'strategy used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts' which allows to 'quantify and analyse the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts [and] make inferences' about them (2021, 9). Hence,

Figure 9: Document Analysis Map



the first stage envisaged the reduction of data into more manageable proportions (Ahmed 2010; Gross 2018), a rather basic and positivist approach to text mining which has as its primary function the isolation of relevant pieces of text to enhance focus. Moreover, a keyword search based on headings and subheadings was carried out to look at how the rural is referenced and identify key sections in the documents for spatially related concepts and measures.

Properly speaking, data reduction is not a coding strategy, but a preliminary step to coding which has a significant impact on what comes under the eye of the researcher. From the second reading on (Figure 9, Phase 2), the engagement with the data thus became more 'qualitative', so that, when necessary, all the parts of the document could be explored. This is because the focus shifted towards searching for relationships, such as the expectations placed among different territories, the general attitude of the state towards rural economies, and the nature of the NSSZ. Such steps allowed to extract beyond the major sections, and include fundamental concepts not worded according to the searching terms.

The other problem that needs to be emphasised is that of incompleteness of relevant information deriving from the nature of the data (Figure 9, Phase 3). There are various instances in which it was necessary to complement data through desk based research to provide clarifications, explanations, or context. Therefore, although the JRS is the leading document, data have been triangulated to complement findings or sustain arguments when the main documents fall short of important information. In particular, six types of documents were consulted. The ones that are included are academic sources, which were used to understand the peculiarity of the JRS as a flexible tool in the hands of policymakers, and online sources, such as the *Japan Spotlight*, a publication by the Japanese Economic Foundation which disseminates information in English on business and politics and which features, among others, interviews of prominent figures in the Japanese political and economic arena. Articles from this publication were used to understand the motivations and rationale behind the NSSZs. Ministerial documents, especially those from the MAFF such as Yearbooks, provided information and statistics to understand trends in the relevant policy area, whereas documents concerning the working and previous evaluation of the Yabu NSSZ, provided by the Yabu City Hall (paper and online documents) or retrieved from the Cabinet Office website, served to explain the type of intervention and general incentives the intervention is supposed to create to foster revitalisation. A major limitation of the approach is clearly that it is hard to systematise the integration of data coming from external resources, because they cover different informational deficiencies.

A more schematic approach would on the contrary be possible for the documents which were discarded from the analysis despite their relevance, that is, reports on the meetings of the NSSZ Advisory Council ("National Strategic Special Zone Advisory Council" 2023), where the evolution

of the programme was debated by a variety of stakeholders, such as local administrations, academics, policymakers from various ministries, representatives of civil society, for profit and non-profit organisations, and companies. The only reason these reports and the annexed documents presented during the meetings were discarded is that a professional translation would have been required, as these documents are not available in English and were approached through automatic translation software (DeepL), therefore lacking the rigour that was applied to interviews (more later). If more schematically analysed, the insights derived by these documents might be substantial[20]. Whereas such omission is due to time and cost considerations and constitutes a clear limitation of the research, it is also a potential input for further exploration. In a likely fashion, although less focused, national and local media have reported substantially on the NSSZ and are a rich source to discover the unravelling of local politics[21]. With the help of the librarian at the University of Sheffield, some articles on the NSSZ were retrieved, and information about the Tajima region was obtained. The same limitations seen above however apply, meaning that these sources built up to increase the knowledge of the researcher, but they have not been explicitly utilised because of translation issues.

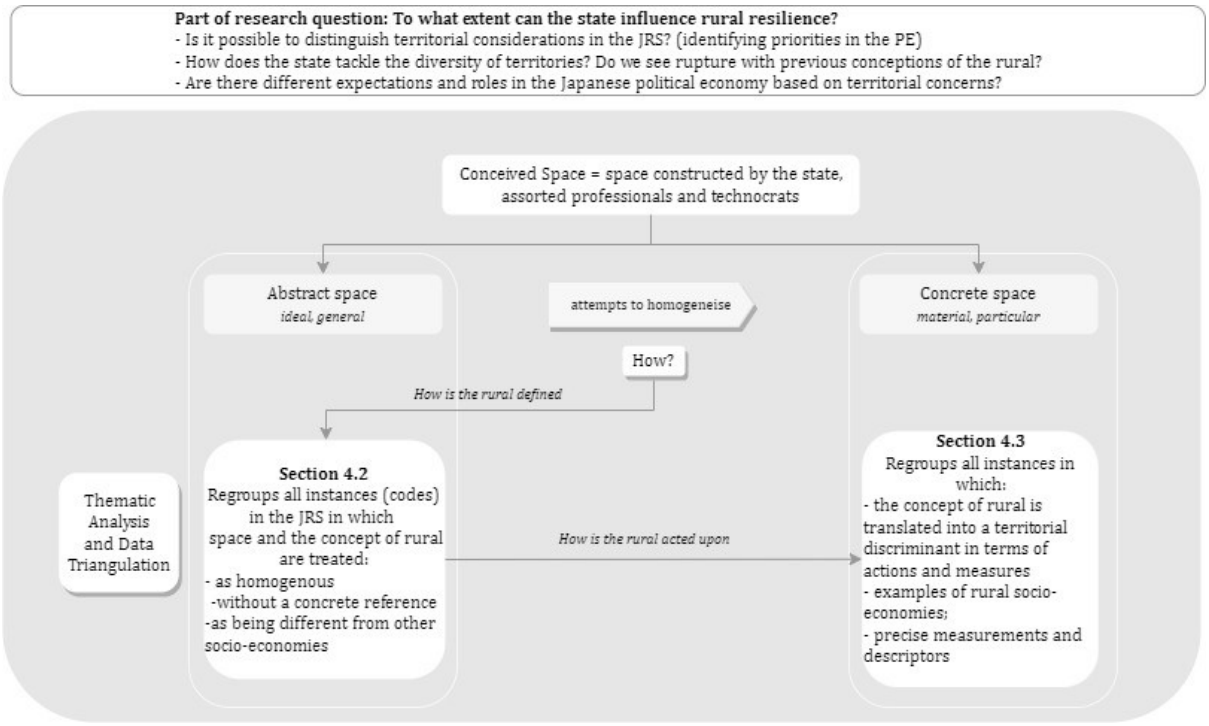
Looking at the precise steps undertaken to create themes, the general approach taken in the research is coding reliability, whereby themes are a mix of pre-established and new themes, created during the processing of data (Braun and Clarke 2020a). It was mentioned before that the document analysis mainly supports the first research question, to what extent can the state influence rural resilience. The overarching organising concepts of Chapter 4 are derived from the way Lefebvre described conceived space as the space constructed by the state and the elites, As shown in Figure 10, themes are organised around the process through which abstract space tries to conquer concrete space — which, in turn, relates to the way generalisations of the rural can be created and exert a performative power over certain socio-economies. Hence, all the instances (codes) which suggested that space is homogenous, referred to it in vague manner, or when spaces are treated as being different from others were all regrouped together under a major theme, that of ideal spaces. In parallel, all those instances whereby it is possible to connect the ways in which abstract spaces forces its way into concrete space – be it in the form of measures,

[20] Even with the language limitations, aspects of relevance emerged reminding of the complex nature of policymaking and the interactions between people and places, such as the connections between some figures in the NSSZ Advisory Council and the companies operating in the NSSZ; the divergent views on agriculture advanced by stakeholders; the contradictions between the stated aims of the programme and the way it works and what it achieves; and mimetic responses whereby local administrations emulate measures from other localities when they feel they confront similar issues.

[21] For example, there were some interesting articles about the struggles of Yabu city to propose new candidates for the local mayoral elections. This could, in turn, favour the continuation of certain types of politics that hardly represent the younger generations.

descriptions, or examples of spaces (e.g., specific places) – were grouped under efforts to join ideal and material spaces.

Figure 10: Organisation of Findings in Chapter 4




### 3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews: enabling the study of rural resilience as seen and practised by private economic agents

If document analysis is mainly conceived to grasp the perspective of the state, interviews were meant to capture the perspective of private economic agents on how their beliefs and actions are shaped by the rural environment and shape rural resilience. Coming back to Lefebvre's spatial triad, the realms of spaces of representations and spatial practices are thus brought into the conversation.

Although Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 share similar methods of data collection, it is necessary to note, as described in Section 3.1.1 and shown in Figure 11 and Figure 12, that the way the samples are grouped means that Chapter 5 directly observes both the way that state and private economic agents influence rural resilience, while Chapter 6 only contains direct observations on private economic agents.

Taking advantage of their exploratory function, semi-structured interviews were used to learn about the interpretations provided by informants and to obtain information about the social

Figure 11: Semi-structured interviews map (agriculture)

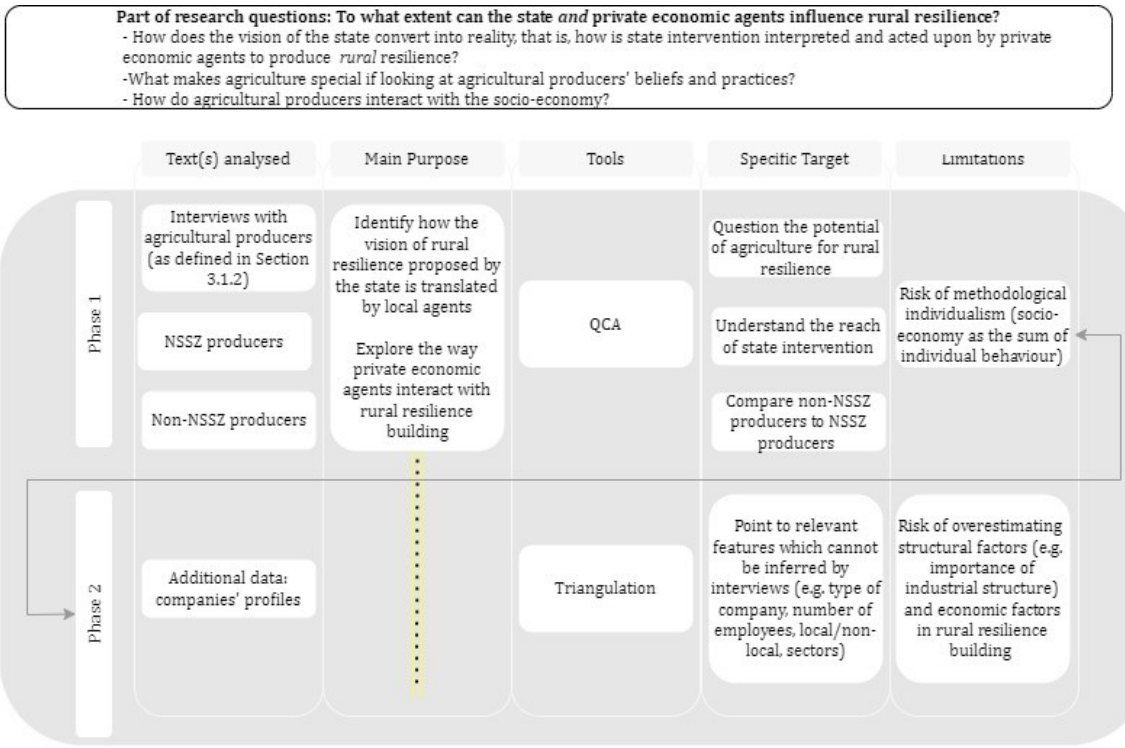
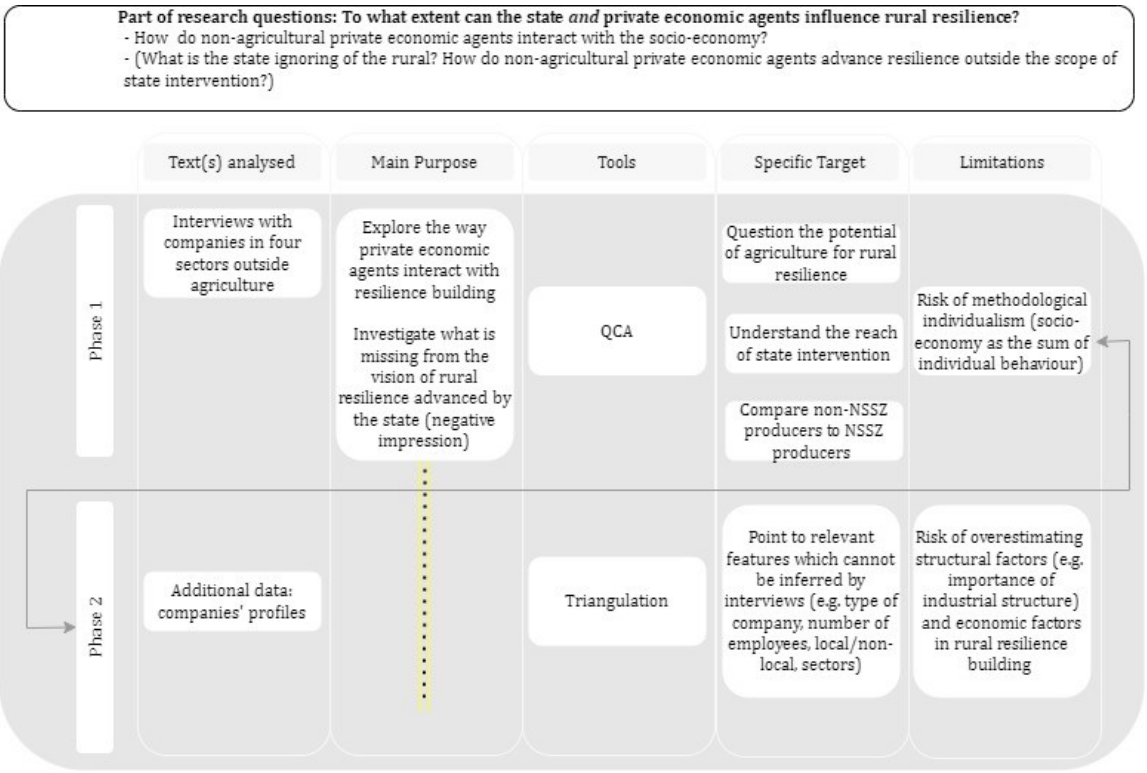



Figure 12: Semi-structured interviews map (heterogenous sample)




context, constraints and resources within which informants act (Smith and Elger 2012; McLachlan and Garcia 2015; Alvesson 2003). The researcher and the informant (participant) are

both knowledgeable, but there is a 'division of expertise' and a 'teaching-learning' dynamic ongoing between the two (Pawson 1996). Leading questions in the protocol aimed at gaining better appreciation of the structures that make the world of private economic agents (Table 9).

*Table 9: List of leading questions (variations of)*

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Introduce the motivation for starting or operating in your business |
| 2 | Consider how your business has changed since it was founded. What are the most significant changes that took place in the way you operate your business? Why are they relevant? |
| 3 | Considering that your company is located in a rural area, can you please give examples on how the characteristics of your local area influence your business? |
| 4 | Population in your area is expected to change significantly in the next decades. In which way do you believe demographic changes are influencing or will influence the operations of your business? |
| 5 | Please discuss the importance of financial support for your business. Is it the most important? What alternative support is needed and why? |
| 6 | To what extent do you agree or disagree that entrepreneurs in rural areas should be responsible for the revitalisation of the rural environment? And what is the role of the state? |

Although how a socio-economy develops hardly fits into a fixed pattern (Henderson 2002), some topics were expected to surface considering the previous literature on rural entrepreneurship and the empirical literature on demographic changes in Japan. Follow-up questions tried to bring back answers to the practices of participants, so as to emphasise their agency and the limits and potential of individual actions and beliefs. This was done mostly by investigating deeper in the measures undertaken by companies to counter negative situations or to reinforce positive ones.

In terms of practicalities, on average interviews lasted one hour and a half, which is sufficient if accounting for interpreting time. Interviews were carried out through the assistance of an interpreter, and this would have been impossible were it not for the support of the university, considering the substantial challenges in doing fieldwork in Japan and finding interpreters in Japan.

#### *3.3.2.1 Sampling: an iterative journey*

Although the concept of data saturation is frequently used in qualitative research and thematic analysis (TA) to determine the quantity of interviews needed (Marshall 1996; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006; Fusch and Ness 2015), the determination of the sample in the research has been an iterative process, 'a pragmatic activity, shaped and constrained by the time and resources available to the researcher … as much as it is also shaped by other things' (Braun and Clarke 2019b, 211). Whilst multiple factors came into play, the aspects below were taken into consideration in relation to the size and nature of the sample.

Firstly, the main sampling technique utilised in the research is selective sampling, whereby the procedures to choose participants are delineated before the start of data collection (Draucker et al. 2007). Since the beginning, coherently with the research question, the core targets were private economic agents, who, for the scope of the thesis, include entrepreneurs, owners, and managers of business activities. For brevity or when emphasising the organisation, these might be referred to as 'companies'. The number of companies participating in the NSSZ, representing the full population of the state intervention chosen, was given (maximum 13), so, what remained to be decided was how many companies from which other sectors should be included in the research. To do so, there was a 'guestimation' before fieldwork (Braun and Clarke 2019b), related both to the established practice, that is, taking as a reference existing qualitative studies on rural companies and economies (Horiuchi 2017), as well as to the (under) estimated costs needed for the processing of the data. The basis of the sample was thus around 30 companies.

Reasonable and as far as possible non-demanding criteria about companies' characteristics were provided to the gatekeepers: SMEs operating in the four sectors for which changes in employment were foreseen to be relevant. Because two sites were involved in the research and because the question on whether state intervention would influence localities differently was still being considered, there was an attempt to match the sample in terms of sector and number of employees (Table 10 and 11).

*Table 10: Sample History and Details*

| **Sector** | **Yabu (Participant)** | **Employee (range)** | **Sector** | **Asago (Participant)** | **Employee (range)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 5 | 1-4 | Agriculture | 3 | 1-4 |
| Construction | 16 | 10-29 | Construction | 23 | 10-29 |
| Construction | 7 | 1-4 | Construction | 29 | 5-9 |
| Manufacturing | 17 | 10-29 | Manufacturing | 21 | 10-29 |
| Manufacturing | 8 | 10-29 | Manufacturing | 24 | 50-99 |
| Manufacturing | 15 | 5-9 | Manufacturing | 30 | 30-49 |
| Medical/ welfare | 9 | 5-9 | Medical/ welfare | 22 | 1-4 |
| Medical/ welfare | 19 | 50-99 | Medical/ welfare | 25 | 100+ |
| Services | 13 | 1-4 | Services | 35 | 5-9 |
| Services | 11 | 1-4 | | | |
| Services | 12 | 10-29 | Services | 26 | 10-29 |
| Agriculture | 1 | 30-49 | Agric./Manuf. | 34 | 30-49 |
| Agriculture | 3 | 1-4 | Agriculture | 31 | 1-4 |
| Agriculture | 4 | 10-29 | | | |
| Agriculture | 6 | 1-4 | | | |
| Agriculture | 10 | 10-29 | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 14 | 1-4 | | | |
| Agriculture | 18 | 5-9 | | | |
| Manuf./Agric. | 2 | 100+ | Manufacturing | 20 | 100+ |
| Services | 37 | 50-99 | Services | 27 | 30-49 |
| Manufacturing | 38 | 100+ | Manufacturing | 33 | 30-49 |
| Manufacturing | 32 | 10-29 | Manufacturing | 28 | |

*Legend*

| | |
|---|---|
| Light blue | Companies participating in the NSSZ |
| Green | Sector and number of employees match |
| Gold | Companies suggested as either: 1) a model company for business model, innovation, or similar; 2) having participated in previous governmental programme; 3) representative of the city |

*Table 11: Participants by sector and main activity*

| No.. | Sector | Main activities |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | Agriculture | Vegetable farms |
| **2** | Manufacturing | Book binding; document repairs; garlic production |
| **3** | Agriculture | Sake rice |
| **4** | Agriculture | Sales related to agricultural production |
| **5** | Agriculture | Tourism farm |
| **6** | Agriculture | Flower production |
| **7** | Construction | Wooden works and renovation for infrastructure |
| **8** | Manufacturing | Wooden chips production |
| **9** | Welfare | Professional services (dentist) |
| **10** | Agriculture | Production and marketing of agricultural and livestock products and processed products |
| **11** | Services | Retail (B2C) |
| **12** | Services | Funeral services |
| **13** | Agriculture and Service | Guest house |
| **14** | Agriculture | Vegetable farm |
| **15** | Manufacturing | Manufacturing and sale of metal springs |
| **16** | Construction | Housing construction and renovation; real estate sales |
| **17** | Manufacturing | Soy sauce production |
| **18** | Agriculture | Vegetable Farms |
| **19** | Welfare | Healthcare services |
| **20** | Manufacturing | Components related to cars |
| **21** | Manufacturing | Sake manufacturing industry |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **22** | Welfare | Professional services (orthopaedics; gym) |
| **23** | Construction | Construction industry |
| **24** | Manufacturing | Electric components |
| **25** | Welfare | Healthcare services |
| **26** | Services | Retail - Medical devices |
| **27** | Retail and Services | Sale of souvenirs, management of restaurant, direct sales of agricultural products |
| **28** | Manufacturing | Cages; tubes; iron parts |
| **29** | Manufacturing | Electric components |
| **30** | Manufacturing | Manufacturing and wholesale import of mops, car wash products, import wholesale, manufacturing of bags |
| **31** | Agriculture | Agriculture (paddy rice, Tamba black beans, edamame) |
| **32** | Manufacturing | Food manufacturing |
| **33** | Manufacturing | Components related to cars |
| **34** | Agriculture | Confectionery manufacturing |
| **35** | Service | Guest house, food services |
| **36** | Agriculture | Cultivation of tomatoes and strawberries |
| **37** | Service | Aerial photogrammetry (digital mapping), surveying industry |
| **38** | Manufacturing | Machinery for agricultural production |

Activities are self-reported in the majority of cases (if not, resources were retrieved based on the company's websites)

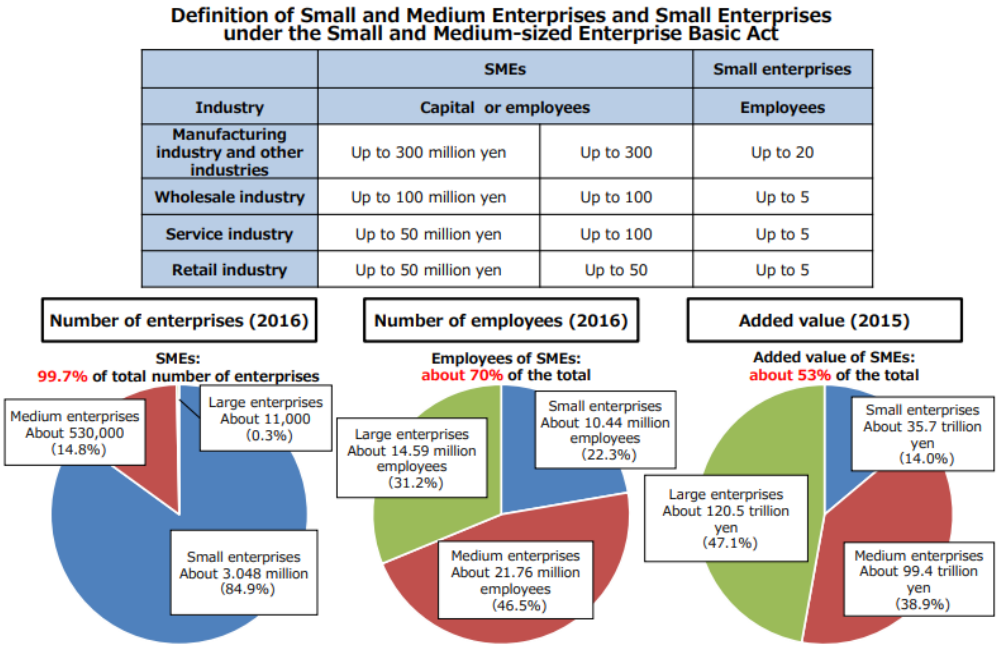
Secondly, there have been in the research what I refer to, for the lack of better words and correct terminology, as moments of 'advanced selective' sampling or 'interrupted theoretical sampling', which share the inductive element of theoretical sampling but only partially its goal towards building theory. In its native dominion of grounded research, theoretical sampling is defined as 'the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, and analyses his data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges' (Glaser 1978, cited in: Coyne 1997, 625). Hence, the sample is enlarged starting from a need activated during data analysis with the precise aim of theory generation. However, because of the rhythms of organising fieldwork and because multilingual research requires heavy post data collection editing, just as it would have been impossible to 'assess' data saturation, so it would have been impossible to follow the guidelines of rigorous theoretical sampling.

Nonetheless, the sample was expanded during the research to reflect fairness towards localities and in response to a suspicion rising from fieldwork, that is, that despite the state's depiction of agriculture as the future sector for rural revitalisation, maybe local administrations, if given the freedom to choose how to represent themselves, would not agree to such vision. Moreover, the city of Asago should have the opportunity to also indicate its local efforts. Some companies were thus chosen by the local governments under request, based on what they *perceived* to be companies representative of the locality, desirable business models, or examples of successful initiatives in the locality, regardless of the sector. The germs for further theorisation were planted not from a reading of the data, but from the context, reflexive practice, and the leftover memories of interviews. Eventually, I could not follow up the lead started for practical reasons (Covid), but the fact that some companies are perceived as positive examples stays within the history of the sample.

Thirdly, the sample is linked to the purpose of the study. Recollecting its premises, generalisations in the research are linked to the capacity of the state, rather than the likelihood that certain phenomena are replicated. The sample outside state intervention, that is, the part of the sample whose size needed to be decided, stands as a cohesive group for the *exclusion* of the different ways all companies participate in the local socio-economy from what is considered as rural. It is based on diversity, not representativeness as in more positivist-oriented studies. The research cannot and is not meant to assess the scale of certain variables or phenomena, although it can acknowledge when trends appear within the sample.

Finally, precise numbers and specifications. In terms of participants in the research, the sample utilised in the research includes findings from 38 participants. Most interviewees are entrepreneurs (founders), owners or site managers, and only in a couple of situations, heads of human resources. Occasionally, interviews were carried out with multiple participants, as some participants were accompanied by trainees, government officials, or personnel from different departments. With the exclusion of the agricultural sector and for-profit companies operating in welfare, which follow different classifications, all companies are SMEs. Nonetheless, it should be noted that in Japan companies might be classified as SMEs either because of the number of employees *or* the amount of capital, and hence companies display much diversity in terms of employees (Figure 8). Table 9 provided above only provides the range of employees because larger participants could become identifiable.

*Figure 13: SMEs in Japan*




Source: (SMEA 2019)

Other informants of the research include people from the City Halls (total: three encounters plus correspondence via email), the Chambers of Commerce (total: two encounters plus correspondence), academics (total: 3 encounters), and even other companies (two encounters) and a farmers' association (one encounter). Paper materials handed in by these informants have been included, but the conversations, as mentioned at the end of Section 3.1.1, have been excluded from the analysis. This is because these unstructured interviews took place under diverse conditions, occasionally unexpected. For instance, the first meetings with the City Halls were supposed to be preliminary meetings to better understand the region and local priorities, to be followed up after finishing interviews with companies in more systematic ways, especially to clarify points of contradiction. However, the second round of interviews did not take place as the Covid-19 pandemic hit. The same holds for the two Chambers of Commerce. Academics from Kobe University were approached to discuss the NSSZ programme and provided valuable information on existing evaluations of the programme (again, all the material is in Japanese)[22]. They also accompanied me to Yabu, where I had the occasion of meeting other local businesses. And, indeed,

[22] Opening the brackets, progression of the Yabu NSSZ has been monitored substantially (metrics and numbers provided in Chapter 4). The way evaluations have been carried out, however, has major differences with that of the research. In the Japanese materials consulted, evaluations are number-driven; how many companies have participated, how many employees hired, how much land has been put into use, and so forth. These are basic evaluations of the programme which, while fundamental, do not relate the intervention to the territory. Any programme will eventually bring *some* results, but the point is: does this intervention make sense in its core principles, in relation to the challenges of demographic change?

many interesting things emerged during these conversations, such as the struggles to cover shifts for urban-based shops to sell local products. However, due to the unsystematic process, none of these interview materials have been presented in the analysis, although some observations might echo arguments raised or touched upon by the informants. The interviews presented are thus a cohesive sample in terms of including only private economic agents. Further data would be needed to corroborate how other stakeholders engage with the localities, states and private economic agents.

#### *3.3.2.2 Recruitment: Interpreting social norms from the researcher's perspective*

Up to this point, the research design has been treated as a series of strategic decisions, as far as possible carefully planned, and rather 'predictable'. Nonetheless, as a foreigner having very basic knowledge of Japanese[23] and doing international research in a country where English does not function as the *lingua franca* for communication, there was no guarantee that the plans would live up to expectations. Fieldwork is a personal experience as much as an implementation phase for data collection. This section tackles the recruitment process.

Recruitment is one of the hardest challenges for researchers, and rarely is the smooth process we imagine when reading papers (Green and Vandall-Walker 2017). A posteriori, it is easy to state that the recruitment process was rather successful, although long. As a matter of fact, recruitment lasted as long as fieldwork, from March 2019 to September 2019, when 39 interviews were completed[24]. In total, eight visits for a total duration of 19 days were carried out in order to gather data, and at least another three visits outside scheduled data collection were conducted to the site in order to get better acquainted with the localities. These are the objective facts, the measurable achievements of the research in terms of recruitment.

How to get there, however, is another story, from my perspective, a story of relationships and trust. In Japan, I had to forget what autonomy is about, and the feeling is that I was adopted by a society. In daily life, this meant communicating with a mix of gestures, drawings, phone calls to friends and google translate, having surreal 'conversations' about what I can never be sure of, relying on the kindness of people who guided me to train stations and put me in the correct queue, and, when that was not available, getting lost until I found either someone to help me or my destination. For almost a year, I got used to living in a sort of entropic state, where everything eventually would make sense, but nothing made sense in the moment I was living it. Barthes

[23] I am, though, a Mandarin speaker, which helps a lot with written documentation.
[24] One participant was excluded (snowballed from another participant).

recollected similar impressions of his trip to Japan, and poetically wrote about the feeling of living within but also outside society:

> The murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection, envelops the foreigner (provided the country is not hostile to him) in an auditory film which halts at his ears all the alienations of the mother tongue: the regional and social origins of whoever is speaking, his degree of culture, of intelligence, of taste, the image by which he constitutes himself as a person and which he asks you to recognize. Hence, in foreign countries, what a respite! Here, I am protected against stupidity, vulgarity, vanity, worldliness, nationality, normality.
>
> […] in Japan the body exists, acts, shows itself, gives itself, without hysteria, without narcissism, but according to a pure — though subtly discontinuous — erotic project. It is not the voice (with which we identify the 'rights' of the person), which communicates (communicates what? our — necessarily beautiful —soul? our sincerity? our prestige?), but the whole body (eyes, smile, hair, gestures, clothing) which sustains with you a sort of babble that the perfect domination of the codes strips of all regressive, infantile character. To make a date (by gestures, drawings on paper, proper names) may take an hour, but during that hour, for a message which would be abolished in an instant if it were to be spoken (simultaneously quite essential and quite insignificant), it is the other's entire body which has been known, savored, received, and which has displayed (to no real purpose ) its own narrative, its own text (1982, 9–10).

Accepting the lack of total control that researchers can be so tempted to strive for might be a fair way to describe my situation when approaching fieldwork. Before leaving for Japan, I was warned by several experienced area studies researchers that, although not at your pace, following procedures might turn out to be more rewarding than trying to creatively dig your own grave. If respecting the local customs, rhythms, and procedures, the Japanese local administrations are indeed quite open to satisfy the researcher's needs and open their networks, putting you in direct contact with companies. Alternative paths, such as, for example, using online lists of companies from Hello Work or other platforms to contact participants, might still work well if any companies are fit for the research. However, as some background information is not disclosed in websites (such as number of employees), it would have been much harder to create a sensible sample which mirrored the requirement of the research. Hence, I preferred to have a cooperative gatekeeper, despite the time this might require.

That said, when reading about doing fieldwork in Japan (Bestor, Steinhoff, and Bestor 2003), one of the recurring themes is the importance of previous social connections as channels to recruitment, which we as the research team lacked. How recruitment started in the research then could have happened everywhere. Professor Kokubu, one of my supervisors at the Kobe University, organised a visit to Yabu and Asago, to help me get an idea of what would await us and to start surveying with the Yabu City Hall whether it would be possible to do fieldwork there. Hence, there was a simple plan: not having previous contacts, we had to create them.

Armed with mandatory business cards, an introduction letter from Prof Kokubu and accompanied by my fellow PhD student, we headed towards the Yabu City Hall not really knowing what to expect. Before entering we had a break, and my colleague started talking to a person outside the office, explaining why we (including me, a foreigner) were there. It turned out that that person was working in the NSSZ in Yabu. He introduced us to the NSSZ team, and they agreed

to help us contact the NSSZ companies. Obviously, the administration checked that we were referenced by a reliable university (make sure to have at least the information sheet). The Yabu City Hall also introduced us to the Yabu Chamber of Commerce, who helped us identify other companies according to the guidelines provided (sectors). Concomitantly, the Asago City Hall was also contacted via phone call, and they similarly agreed to provide contacts through the local Chamber of Commerce. As pointed out (see previous table), both City Halls also agreed to suggest companies either perceived as particularly representative of their locality, had participated in previous governmental initiatives, or were particularly innovative. Most of the recruited companies were thus contacted through the institutional mediation of the City Halls and the Chambers of Commerce, to which I am highly indebted. Only four companies were recruited outside such channels, two through snowballing techniques and one under the recommendation of Professor Minami, my supervisor at Kobe University. In total 48 companies were contacted, and 9 companies either rejected the interview or could not be reached.

Every time new participants were proposed, the process of contacting them was activated. Again, my reliance on the research assistant is undeniable, from contacting participants to organising the trip — trains, hostels, taxis, and renting cars. In my experience, calling in Japan is more effective than sending emails — hence, no standardised email can be used by substituting the names of participants. Many afternoons were spent making phone calls, obtaining confirmation on dates and times and email or post addresses to send the information sheet on the research and a brief questionnaire via email or via post. The consent form, which is not a standard practice in Japan and is even seen as a suspicious contract, was signed before each interview to clarify the rights of the participants. Follow-up emails or letters were sent to each participant to thank them for their time. All the follow-up letters included a few words of appreciation on what the interview enabled me to achieve — be this a feeling or a new perspective on a topic. Moreover, as per custom in Japan, all participants were provided with an *omiyage*, a small gift, before the interview, and, as per custom, most producers reciprocated with local products or by taking pictures together.

Behind each of these steps, there is a large amount of time involved, and many efforts from the research assistant and me. Although the experience itself pays for such efforts, it is clear that generous time allocation, patience, and collaborations have been the main ingredients in finalising the fieldwork.

#### 3.3.2.2.1 Compiling: challenges in international research

Compiling is the preparation of the texts before any further use, what is called data familiarisation and writing formalisation notes in Braun and Clarke (2020a). This process might be less relevant in monolingual studies, but should not be underestimated in international research. Doing

fieldwork in international settings without or with little fluency in the hosting country's mother tongue made the post data collection process as intense as the recruitment and interview processes, as it includes three phases which are extremely resource- and time-consuming. As far as possible, I decided not only to describe the process, but also to measure it in terms of time and financial resources required. Before moving to the three steps, and clearing the basis for any misunderstanding, all the interviews were fully transcribed and translated, and all the people involved in the interpreting, transcription, and translation process were fairly paid. Part of the costs were covered by the Kobe University (research assistant and transcriptions), part by the University of Sheffield (travel expenses) and part by the researcher (translation of interviews and additional compensation for on-site interpreting for research assistant). The project also received ethical approval. Participants were handed an information sheet, a consent form, and a brief company profile to fill in. Translators were required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The first step was the transcription of the interviews. On the one hand, this involved transcribing the English part of the interviews, which covered both the questions from the researcher and the interpretation of the local helper. As the interviews were of substantial length, the transcription of a single interview took approximately eight hours (hence accounting for approximately 40 working days for the whole sample). On the other hand, the English transcripts needed to be complemented with the Japanese transcripts, a task which was carried out by a professional agency. In terms of time, this process was quicker, taking between 2-3 days per interview. In terms of costs, a monolingual transcription for Japanese of an interview cost between £80-£120 depending on the length.

The second step involved procuring reliable Japanese translators within my budget, which stood at approximately £120 per interview. From my personal experience, this can be very challenging, as it excludes professional agencies and means looking for translators in open markets. The help of my fellow colleagues at the Kobe University and previous connections with the Ca' Foscari University of Venice proved essential, as several people who were contacted in Japan refused to undertake the task, as they did not feel confident in translating into English. As the interviews were conducted in a rural area, despite the usual practice in translation studies to choose a mother tongue speaker in the target language (i.e., an English speaker), I preferred to have at least one Japanese native speaker translator who had a grasp of the different ways of saying and the appropriate contextual references. I do not regret the choice, as many of the translations include comments on specific terms which might be ambiguous or signal points of discrepancy between the translation and the interpreting which proved fundamental for the third step (below). At the end, a total of 3 translators were engaged in the process, with one main translator covering approximately 80 percent of the interviews.

Choices concerning the translation need to be evaluated thoroughly, and as soon as possible in the research. The decision taken was to rely on people I was acquainted with and could keep contacting easily, and lower as far as possible the commissions taken by translation agencies. Some translations were also gifted to me, and if you work within a budget, these are important resources. There is a price attached to this way of proceeding: it took more than three months to find someone that accepted the work, and more than six months passed before having the full translations of the interviews — that is to say, a total of nine months was required in my case to have possession of all the translations.

The final step included checking each of the 39 translations and problems within the transcripts. Such a process might appear quite peculiar, as a non-native speaker checks the work of a native speaker, and it is not a flawless process. There are, however, some 'tricks' in the Japanese language that can be used to assess the quality of the translation, and it is important not to underestimate that the knowledge that the researcher forms during the years on specific fields is not shared by transcribers or even translators.

The way I proceeded was to start from where translators had commented that the sections were unclear. In the original transcripts, ambiguous cases are usually rendered in Katakana, the Japanese alphabet used also for the phonetic transliteration of English or foreign terms. Terms in katakana in the transcripts are usually technical terms not known by the transcriber or ways in which the participants try to communicate with the researcher directly. In both cases, the original word might not be transcribed, and therefore cannot be translated, correctly. Mostly, those terms would be available in materials provided by the participants on their businesses or websites and could be retrieved by going back to them, or are terms that, as a foreigner used to listening to the local adaptation of English terms, could be picked up by listening again to the recordings. For example, the transcription rendered the term QOL (Quality of Life, a standard way to measure performance in the welfare sector) as 'Kyū o eru' (キュウを得る, 'to obtain a Q'), which is meaningless in the context.

There are harder situations to spot, in which terms are rendered in the transcript in *kanji* (Chinese traditional characters) and *hiragana* (a phonetic lettering system for Japanese words) and the resulting sentence in the translation makes sense, but the original context is lost. For instance, there is a practice in Japan called *Hojō seibi* (ほ場整備), which is translated in English as 'field maintenance'. This is an established practice pushed by local governments and private associations, specific to the context of agricultural land consolidation. In one of the transcripts, the term that the transcriber picked up was '*hojo seibi*' (補助整備, note the slightly different pronunciation), and then translated as auxiliary maintenance, which severs the connotations that

the practice has to a wider movement taking place in Japan. Although it is outside the scope of the research to make a full account of such instances, it is important that researchers are aware that the interview transcripts, even when produced professionally, might need this step to ensure that meaningful information is not lost. Of course, an alternative is to ignore such problems and cut ambiguous sections.

In terms of what is used as supporting evidence in the research, it should be noted that only the English translation of the Japanese parts is used. Multi-lingual conversations mediated by an interpreter are complex, linguistically and socially, for all participants. The research was carried out with a research assistant, and although the quality of the process and product exceeded expectations, there are well-known problems with consecutive interpreting (Pöchhacker 2011), whereby 'the interpreter waits for the speaker to stop after several sentences before rendering the statement in the target language from memory and individual notes' (Suaib and Nur 2020). When looking at the transcripts, linguistic problems, such as the complete rendition of information or the interpretation of nuances and so forth, were paradoxically less important than were, for example, misunderstandings between interviewer and interpreter or different forms of modifications to questions and answers introduced by the interpreter, who is naturally prone to add personal experience and comments to the conversation or to answer to questions made by the interviewee without translating them. Because of such modifications to the original intended communication, and the occasional disassociation between the English and Japanese version, the main flow of the conversation is that between the interpreter and participants, and the voice of the researcher becomes secondary in the final transcript.

On the one side, these are unavoidable features of multi-lingual conversations with the resources of a PhD student, and a researcher should accept that their role in such situations is to a certain extent shared with the interpreter. The research assistant has been the greatest treasure of my Japanese stay, and as a companion and enabler rather than a helper. On the other hand, there are some measures that can be taken to soften problems during the interviews. Hence, the social interactions between the interviewer and interviewee can be remarked by contextual gestures, often physical in nature, such as keeping eye-contact with the interviewees, taking notes even when not knowing what is being said to keep concentration and suggest engagement, or subtle coughing to signal the interpreter to translate are good ways to be involved in the conversation. Debriefing sessions with the interpreter help avoiding repeated mistakes.

Whereas a post-fieldwork reading of the transcripts reveals that severe translations problems such as gross misunderstanding were limited, if existing, the opportunity should be taken here to emphasise there are indeed perks in being a non-native researcher and taking leaps of faith in doing international research with substantial uncertainty. On the one hand, I need to

acknowledge that my physical appearance aided me. The fact of being a European, small-sized woman with the average colouring and stature of a Japanese citizen hardly replicates the experience of 'standing-out' and being subject to the constant gaze of people other taller and fairer researchers have witnessed (Culter 2003). On the other hand, participants were often curious about Europe, and I was interrogated multiple times on Brexit, and occasionally on the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and on the Italian countryside, or China. Importantly, when participants hear about foreign experiences, they tend to reciprocate by talking about Japan.

There is also an aspect of pride in being interviewed and in knowing that relatively unknown places in Japan itself might be known elsewhere which positively influenced access to participants. A human approach, including admitting ignorance or making 'stupid questions', or expressing what you see and think without overstating the cultural differences which might separate the researcher's worldview and that of the participants, may be well worth it if the researcher is interested in communicating rather than confirming points. Hence, reflecting on prejudices about Japanese not expressing what they think or even lacking individuality, I do not feel this is the experience I had. Once you got used to moderating expressions such as 'I should not be saying this, but…', which are socially common and appear socially oriented, participants were quite open to offer criticisms and appraisals about what happens in their worlds. Mostly, they are interested in improving the conditions of their places, as I was told in different interviews, and that is, in my personal opinion, the common ground towards which we are working, as individuals.

#### *3.3.2.3 Analysing interview data: themes creation and coding*

Getting back to the more operational aspects of the research design, the last aspect to be covered is the analysis of interview data. The type of analysis method carried out for the interviews is thematic analysis (TA). TA is not one approach, but a cluster of approaches 'which share an interest in capturing patterns in the data' (Braun and Clarke 2020a, 2019a, 2020b). In particular, the specific approach is known as codebook TA, whereby most themes are developed earlier on in the research and others, a minority in the research, through inductive data engagement (Braun and Clarke 2020a). Such process is an iterative, recursive process, involving going back over earlier data and analysis multiple times (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2015).

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 both present findings from interviews using the same questions protocol. The overall framework of analysis is, however, slightly different. As shown in Figure 14, the main framework to organise data in Chapter 5 is the Realist Evaluation Framework, while for Chapter 6 (Figure 15) the analysis is empirically driven or, more specifically, driven by the relationship between structure and agency and the role of the entrepreneur (see: Section 3.2.1).

Figure 14: Framework for the analysis of interview (agriculture sample)

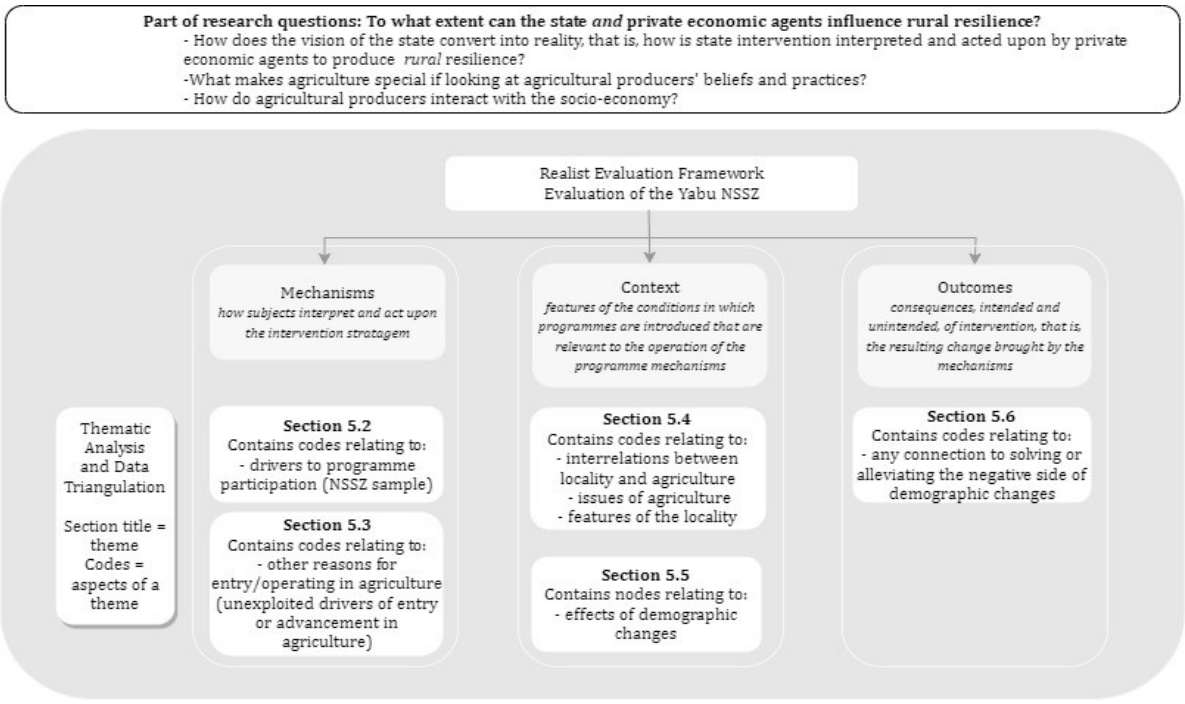
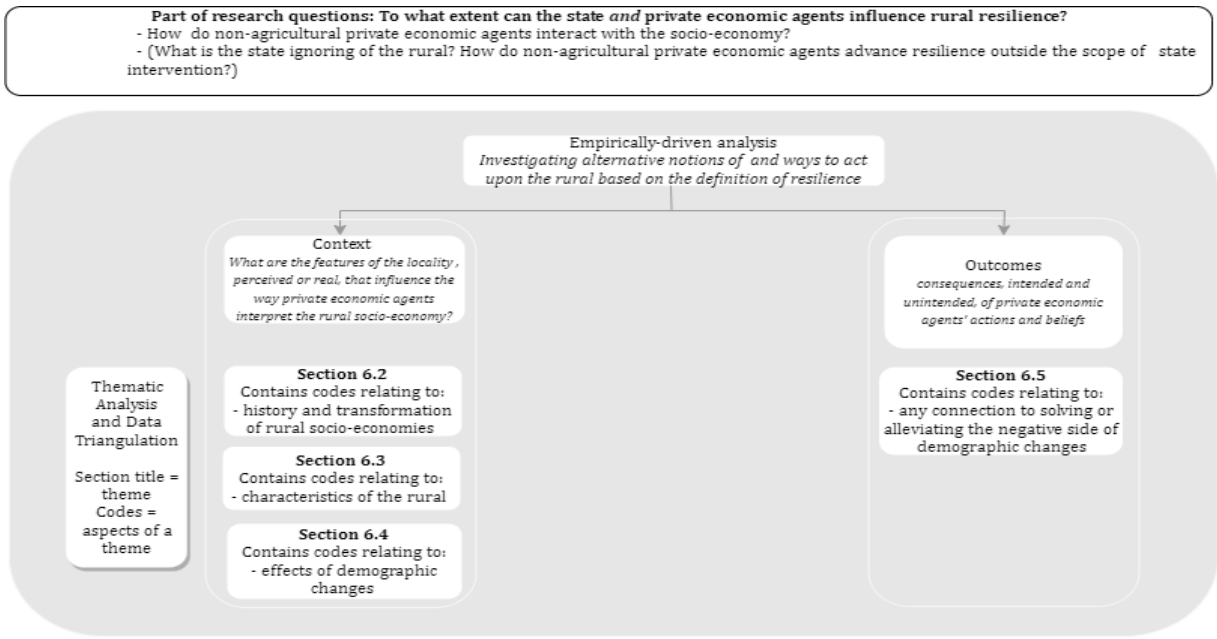



Figure 15: Framework for the analysis of interviews (heterogenous sample)




This is because at its core the Realist Evaluation Framework adds to the analysis of human behaviour and social change a 'push' factor (the mechanisms, the reactions to a set of incentives purposefully activated by a third party, in this case the national government) which, as widely explained, distinguishes the agricultural and the heterogenous sample. Themes which concern how the programme works are all contained in Section 5.2 and 5.3. Conceptually, because of the nature of the intervention, the literature of reference is that included in Section 1.2.3.1, which

discusses agriculture and its relation to the rural. More pragmatically, because the REF is used to evaluate the basic assumptions of the NSSZ programme, the themes connect to the hypotheses for rural revitalisation described in Section 4.3, and in particular 4.3.3, where the expectations on what the programme should achieve were delineated.

That said, both frameworks share two major pillars, what private economic agents take from their environment(s) and what they give back — reflecting the position of private economic agents as 'middlemen' inserted in complex structures which they can modify based on their individual characteristics and circumstances (Wurth, Stam, and Spigel 2022). Hence, on the one hand, there is a context, a set of pre-existing social, economic, political and ideological arrangements that might influence the way private economic agents operate. Themes are centred on the sets of relationships found in the local context (Sections 5.4, 5.5, 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4), tackled in Section 1.2 of the literature review, and especially Section 1.2.1 which discussed the supposed limitations and opportunities of the rural environment and context for private economic agents. These include how private economic agents interpret the rural, what it is made of and its limits and opportunities as well as relationships which private economic agents identify as relevant for their operations but are developed through connections within and outside local boundaries.

On the other hand, there are the outcomes and feedback systems, that is, how private economic agents elaborate and reflect on their environments to produce change, intentionally and unintentionally (Sections 5.6 and 6.5). Private economic agents' understandings and actions are reflected in the way they decide to operate, adapting and reinventing their practices, and this feedback system might bring change to societies themselves. Because resilience is treated as a situated effort (Cote and Nightingale 2012), the main literature of reference is that contained in Section 2.2 which discussed how private economic agents are supposed to contribute to rural revitalisation in Japan through their management practices (especially Section 2.1 on the measures to cope with the PDT). Themes include all the measures undertaken (or not) by private economic agents which might alleviate the worst aspects of demographic changes. Relating to Section 2.2.2, and in particular Section 2.2.2.2, which explore notions of roles and responsibilities of private economic agents in the Japanese political economy, themes were created to capture whether and if the measures undertaken by private economic agents are born out of a sense of responsibility or as a by-product of the need to generate profits. Major sub-themes overwhelmingly relate to work, a key relationship connecting place and people (connected to Section 2.2.2.1 on desirable working practices).

Although codes and themes might be treated as a single process, the research adopts the distinction between the two. Codes are 'a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based

or visual data'(Saldana 2008, 3), usually grasping one observation, while themes cover multiple observations under one heading (Braun and Clarke 2020a), but might include extra-textual elements. Reassembling, the process whereby 'the codes, or categories to which each concept is mapped, are … put into context with each other to create themes' (Castleberry and Nolen 2018, 809), was done mostly by using themes developed early on in the research, with few themes created through inductive data engagement (Braun and Clarke 2020a)[25].

As explained above and just as for the document analysis, the sections' titles are the themes. To avoid confusion, in the research themes are formed using a conjunction of codes coming from the interview texts and information obtained through the companies' profiles, from which other features are emphasised. When the size of the company, the sector or industry of reference, the ownership and management structure, the non-local – local nature of businesses or other extra-textual elements appear as important factors in discerning groups and seem to explain a certain aspect of an issue, these are highlighted within a theme, and even used to structure an argument.

Looking at the creation of codes, systematic data coding was carried out to start the analysis. The interview transcripts were initially divided into four separate documents by sector (agriculture, manufacturing, construction, services, including the welfare sector), with interviews split in sections roughly corresponding to the macro-areas of inquiry (see above: Table 9: List of leading questions (variations of)). Secondly, codes were created. In the research, codes captured diverse dimensions of segments of the speech. The majority of codes were descriptive, with annotated impressions raised from particular statements. Consequently, the coding focus stayed on the semantic rather than on the latent level (Braun and Clarke 2020a).

Considering the length of the interviews, some codes used were in reality categories grouping observations that could be individually coded — a technique known as 'holistic coding' or, more colloquially, 'lumping' (Saldana 2008, 20). For example, the code 'recruitment' was directly used for all facets of hiring practices, with sub-codes specifying relationships produced through the various readings of the text (e.g. age, gender, difficulties, strategies and so forth). On the same lines, long quotations have been mostly used and explained only when there is a substantial argument or point raised by the participant, but observations of a more technical, 'dry' nature (for example, those relating to automation, markets, and so forth) are reported generically, with

[25] For instance, Section 6.2 was created based on the fact that participants shared their histories, and, in so doing, they inserted their operations in the wider dynamics of rural transformation. This connects to the literature presented in Section 1.2.2 and 1.2.3, which emphasises the complexity and path dependence of rural socio-economies, but it was not an expected theme (i.e., no explicit questions directly investigated this aspect).

the participant number disclosed except when participants expressed uneasiness in saying something, as an extra precautionary measure.

The *naming* or the label attached to the text has not changed substantially during the analysis of the interviews and has been considered as a reference point to start mapping different patterns (or the lack thereof) within participants' accounts. What has changed during the analysis is how they were assigned to larger units to constitute themes or the further nuances that, by grouping concepts, the code itself took through sub-coding. Mostly, this is because the data was coded initially in an Excel document, then printed and reworked continuously on paper. However desirable and convenient it might be to use software such as NVivo in terms of flexibility and ease to organise data, access to devices able to support the software proved difficult and inconsistent during lockdown years.

## Interpreting and concluding

Interpreting, an iterative and recursive process, entails formulating analytical conclusions in consideration of the data (Castleberry and Nolen 2018). Underlining that a definition of what constitutes good interpretation does not exist, Yin (2016) remarks that interpreting and concluding do not mean repeating or rewording the findings, but, respectively, assisting to understand the meaning and implications of the findings and the significance of the entire study. These phases elevate the conceptual level by transforming the operational questions into the basic propositions which support the final 'answer' (fallible and one of the many possible interpretations) provided by the research that the thesis advanced.

As it was mentioned, a multi-dimensional logic can be found when different methods and approaches allow to interrogate about contrasting and distinctive questions, so that it becomes possible to advance groups of questions which 'call for some kind of intersection, or interplay, of distinctive ways of seeing and, and which do not involve the squashing of these into one dominant methodological approach and one model of integration' (Mason 2006b, 9). The multi-dimensional logic, together with the realist heuristics, have important implications on the interpretation of the findings and how conclusions are drawn. They emphasise that there are levels of interpretations, which might find only selective 'compatibility'.

The discussion and conclusion section thus presents the researcher's interpretation of how state and private economic agents can shape rural resilience, firstly discussing them individually and then paying more attention on the debate as a whole, as meaningful by itself . While each findings section presents a summary at the beginning of its chapter, the discussion and the conclusion bring back the problem of demographic challenges at the centre. Hence, the interpretation of the findings depends on what are the outcomes of state and private economic agents' ideas and

actions with respect to the decreasing rural population. The apparent irrelevance of some themes, and even inconclusiveness, thus might signal not only distance from the problem, but a lack of capacity for the mechanisms proposed to achieve a certain social goal. While it is true that resilience is treated overwhelming as an outcome, the process by which societies can keep reproducing in 'numerical' terms, resilience building is not the result of one single force.

## 3.4 Key limits of the case and the sample

Finally, some major limitations of the study aside those that have been noted above. Firstly, the case is based around one policy instrument, the JRS — it is a controlled environment where it is *easier* (not easy) to observe the confluence of different capacities involved in resilience building simultaneously and ask what type of a dialogue there is between the parties involved and how it influences rural resilience, without ignoring the concept of the rural. It cannot, and is not meant to, cover all the different measures that have been taken to revitalise rural areas, including the different prefectural and municipal strategies, social measures and so forth. Recognisably, these too can be viewed as manifestations of the state's capacity. Neither can the case cover all the various actors and agents which make our socio-economies – and, indeed, studies select niches in which to operate, What the case can illustrate is, however, the problems which emerge when the interests and capacities of states and private economic agents are erased, flattened or taken for granted, when assumptions overwhelm facts.

Secondly and relatedly, the case focuses on the economic behaviour of agents, and it excludes other factors which might be relevant for rural resilience in the political economy. Most notably, it excludes the political tradition and affiliation of the areas and the personal connections between private and public actors driving intervention (in short, the unofficial version of why Yabu was chosen). These emerged when looking at the history of the corporations invited in the areas and in parliamentary interrogations (refer to excluded secondary sources in Section 3.3.1.2). Although confined outside the scope of the research for time and cost considerations, this line of investigation should not be underestimated. Participants in the interviews know well that one company was more influential than others in pushing some reforms. The ability of the corporate sector to influence policy making in rural areas is another key to understanding the reforms undertaken, which take place in a wider context of liberalisation of the agricultural sector and international agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Yabu might be a small place that nobody knows, but its significance might be larger than the local effects it directly bears.

Thirdly, the perspective from which rural resilience is understood is that of private companies. As such, it excludes other important economic agents, especially workers. There are many untested assumptions behind the supposition that improving local conditions will attract new

people or retain people from out-migrating or similar. It is a possibility, and, as explained in Chapter 2, clearly one which policy makers like to emphasise in their discourses. It is indeed true that the working, local conditions of the Tajima area still seem in many ways to lag behind those of non-rural areas, so it is difficult to imagine alternatives beyond work at the moment. Comparative case studies, or studies with samples from different socio-economic classes (workers, capitalists, and rentiers) might be a future option.

Finally, the sample is not representative of *any* sector and is only partially purposeful. It is a case study to highlight the limits and opportunities of 'unregulated' private actions versus private actions driven by state intervention in providing better chances to rural areas. Within this case, strong sectoral dynamics can be identified, and such dynamics became more important because of the nature of state intervention. Nothing states that intervention in rural areas should be sectoral. Were it not for the nature of state intervention, the biggest cleavages emerging would be the contrast between small companies and big companies, and between those who are completely exposed to the local environment and those who are only partially exposed to it (which roughly corresponds to non-exporters and exporters and only occasionally overlaps with a local-nonlocal difference, something which has been noted in the past (Hoggart 1990)). This means that there are differences between these groups in how they influence rural resilience. The point is to emphasise exactly how, within such diversity, one type of intervention was selected and why other lines of intervention are excluded in the process. From my point of view, this mainly relates to the conflation between the rural and agriculture, which elevates an undeniable characteristic of rural areas to their most important feature — the problem and the solution of rural problems.

## 3.5 Ethics

The research has received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield, accepted by the Kobe University. All the participants received the information sheet containing the purpose of the research, the duration and scope of the interview, and the possibility and details on how to withdraw from the study. All participants gave their informed consent to the interviews and to the recording of interviews. Participants were anonymised, and attention was paid to provide the number of employees in range to prevent the identification of participants. Confidentiality agreements were also signed by translators.

# 4. The Rural Conceived by the State

## 4.1 Introduction to Chapter

This chapter presents findings which contribute to answer the research question 'To what extent can the state influence rural resilience'.

The chapter deconstructs the spatial distribution of state economic policies by looking at the full process leading to the creation of the National Strategic Special Zone (hereafter, NSSZ) in Yabu from the national to the local level to reveal major opportunities and constraints shaping state intervention in rural areas. Full explanations on the sources utilised in this findings section are found in section 3.3.1. As a reminder, the first two sections are mainly based on the original analysis of four policy documents (2013-2016), while the latter mostly relies on complementary information collected during fieldwork. The JRS does not contain specific information on the NSSZs and their workings, therefore documents provided by the Yabu administration or documents published online by the Japanese government or media were included.

The contribution the chapter seeks to bring forward for the thesis as a whole is to show how generalisations about the rural can be generated and reproduced without fully being dependent on the actual socio-economic realities, that is, by highlighting that the rural as a representation of space (the formal representation of the rural in Halfacree (2006)) is a powerful source influencing the destiny of rural socio-economies. Despite much debate on the multi-functionality and diversity of the rural, these generalisations reinforce the view of rural areas as agricultural productive sites and 'communities' at the concrete level by continuing to problematise rural issues as mostly agricultural issues and are recreated at the expense of more holistic understandings of local socio-economies. Hence, as the section unfolds along its core sections, it is possible to see how the state defines rural areas and how it helps shaping them, in what is found overall to be a process of generalisation-particularisation-generalisation of space (or, abstraction, concretisation, abstraction).

Each of the main sections questions how the state shapes its relationship with territories. With each block, the zoom on the rural increases. The first block explores the relationships between state and territories at the national level as found in the JRS. The second block investigates a particular type of policy tool introduced in the JRS, the NSSZs. It argues that, conceptually, NSSZs are cases of particularisation of place, where the state identifies concretely both sites and measures to implement, thus offering an opportunity to observe how state and conceived space come in contact with concrete, spatial practices. The third block centres on Yabu as a Centre for Agricultural Reform in Hilly and Mountainous Areas. What can be observed is the beginning of

the process by which the state shifts from the particularisation of space again to the generalisation of space by proposing the idea that Yabu is a 'model' of local revitalisation based on agriculture, thus establishing a feedback system between the locality and undefined rural areas.

## 4.2 Ideal spaces: state and space in the strategy

This section shows how the state constantly produces space under generalist notions detached from concrete spaces. As a strategic document concerning the totality of the Japanese political economy, the JRS appears largely aspatial on the surface, but this does not imply that policies and measures are spatially distributed in equal manners or that equal expectations are held for all the territories. The relatively few items that have meaningful spatial connotations in the JRS are indicative of the way the government defines different territories and societies and aims to support them. The JRS shows the lines along which the state creates ideal spaces, where the definition of territories maintains a degree of equivocality, indicating not concrete socio-economies but broad territorial confines and the specific types of relationships that link them to the state. In order to show the process of generalisation, or how representations of space are produced and reproduced by the state, the following points are explored: firstly, the section inquires about the significance of space in the JRS; secondly, it focuses on the associations between spaces and roles and rights in the political economy; thirdly, it shows which are the associations between rural spaces and rural societies; and finally, it presents the associations between rural spaces and policy measures.

The first point to clarify is how significant space appears at the superficial level in the context of the JRS, and the answer is: not very. The majority of the items are not spatially or geographically referenced and have general application. Looking at the headings and subheadings, geographical references for the non-urban below the national level include three terms, 'regional', 'rural', and 'local', and are numerically scarce (Table 12). Even when considering the full documents, only the vaguer terms 'regional' and 'local' are used substantially (Table 13). These terms are left undefined in all the versions, reflecting at a first reading not only the generalist scope of the JRS., but also the lack of interest in being too specific at the spatial level.

*Table 12: Geographical References in Headings and Sub-Headings*

| ***Term*** | ***Year*** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| **RURAL** | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| **URBAN** | - | - | 2 | 3 |
| **CIT*** | 1 | 1 | 7 | 4 |

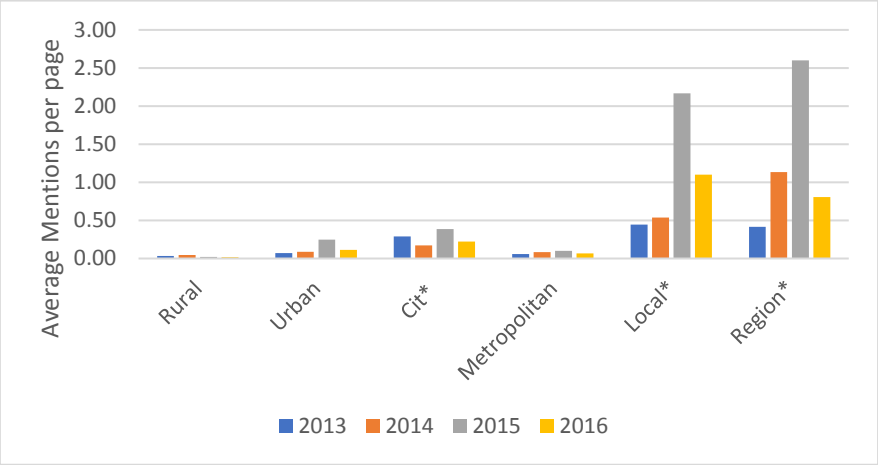
| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **LOCAL** | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| **REGION*** | 3 | 11 | 21 | 9 |

*Table 13: In-Text Geographical References*

| ***Term*** | ***Year*** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** |
| **RURAL** | 5 | 8 | 4 | 4 |
| **URBAN** | 10 | 16 | 54 | 26 |
| **CIT* (EXCLUDING CITIZEN*)** | 41 | 31 | 84 | 51 |
| **METROPOLITAN** | 8 | 15 | 22 | 15 |
| **LOCAL*** | 63 | 96 | 470 | 253 |
| **REGION*** | 59 | 203 | 564 | 185 |

Applying a slightly more qualitative gaze, the position in which these terms appear in the document hierarchy shows that territorial concerns build in relevance up to 2015, when Local Abenomics was launched (Table 14)[26]. Concomitantly, the term 'rural' decreases relative to document length, appearing only in the assessment of past measures. This coincides with the end period of structural reforms in the agricultural sector, thus providing a first hint that the traditional connection between the rural and the state still relies on agriculture.

*Table 14: In-Text Geographical References relative to Document Length*




[26] Whereas the only section heading which uses explicit geographical connotations in the 2013 Strategy was a theme, 'Building regional communities that use their unique local resources to appeal to the world', with a minor sub-heading discussing the promotion of regional resources in the context of SMEs innovation, both topics reappear as key policy measures in the 2014 revision under the headings 'Nurturing industries to become new growth engines and support regional communities' and 'Regional revitalisation and innovation of small and medium-sized/ Regional economic structure reform'. In 2015, the 'Promotion of Local Abenomics' became one of the 'two wheels of the cart', together with the revolution in productivity, to push growth, while in the 2016 revision, regional economies are discussed as one of the ten strategic public-private joint projects in the 'Enhancement of Local Abenomics'.

Going beyond keyword searches, however, space starts to matter from a qualitative perspective. When looking at the context in which regional socio-economies are discussed, what emerges is discontent with those areas and signals that the relationship between the state and regional socio-economies has changed, confirming the trends seen in Chapter 2 of state disengagement from rural socio-economies. The main idea transmitted is that the state wishes to break its previous way to relate to the regions, as 'regional strategies from the past period of robust economic expansion would be ineffective and could lead multiple regions to fall together' (Cabinet Office 2014). Rather than reconceiving the *quality* of investments made in various territories and the reasons they were made, the JRS presents core-periphery types of models to advance why what is left for public spending in terms of social services or industrial upgrading should be concentrated in core cities:

> for the present situation, health and nursing care and other public services, urban functions or industries led by globally competitive regional companies should be accumulated in provincial core cities, which should expand human and information exchange and cooperation with metropolitan regions, other centre cities and their vicinities to pursue the survival of wide-area regions through network-based complementation of functions. Then, regional small and medium-sized enterprises should take on challenges and make efforts to develop unique industries including agriculture and tourism in various regions to drive regional economies (Cabinet Office 2014).

The presence of a territorial double standard, well-known in the Japanese society and academia (see: Lützeler and Ben-Ari 2004), is thus embedded in the existence of a geographical hierarchy distinguishing between a core made of metropolitan regions, spontaneously able to radiate wealth to intermediary hubs (non-metropolitan regions and provincial core cities), which would in turn distribute to the rest of the economies (peripheries). The evocation of 'network-based complementation of functions', an idea suggestive of equal grounds for all the stakeholders, hides the fact that peripheral economies are effectively becoming more subordinate to the centres, as the latter are entitled by their existing advantages to gather even more of the essential *public* and *private* infrastructure for socio-economic growth. Hence, while urban economies need to be supported in their concentration of competitive industries and services as well as public functions, peripheral economies have to identify and foster their strengths while at the same time seeing the compactisation of services around hubs. Regional economies do not appear as vibrant, but as potential burdens to growth capable of making the whole Japanese economy collapse, unworthy of further investments.

Indeed, part of the argument calling for rural areas to abandon their expectations of state-induced revitalisation and focus on the endogenous powers of community-led development (Feldhoff 2013) is based on the reality that the direction of the relationship between state and regional socio-economies is deteriorating, confirming the trends starting in the 1980s-1990s. Rather than being a real choice, enterprises become the exclusive engine through which regional economies are envisioned as able to ''earn in autonomous and sustainable manner to grow into affluent

communities' (Cabinet Office 2013). The mantra of fiscal sustainability is repeatedly stressed in all the versions of the JRS, and even when the state recognises that 'fiscal consolidation cannot be achieved without economic revitalisation', the terms of agreement attached to government's support are that 'striving communities' must 'take a stance such as not to rely on *others* or not to let things slide'(Cabinet Office 2015 emphasis added), 'others' being conveniently deprived of a referent but clearly indicating the state itself. Blamed for having been dependent on the state as if they were unique beneficiaries of the exchange, localities now need to show their active commitment to revitalisation in order to access governmental assistance. Hence, the first way in which the state is portraying regional socio-economies, including rural ones, is as a burden to growth, children which need to become responsible for their destiny and undeserving of further investments.

The way regional and rural socio-economies are to be supported, however, also has conceptual limitations. Conceding that localities *do* reveal an active commitment to revitalisation and communicate it to the state, they also have to overcome the historical relationship through which the state has interpreted their function. This is especially evident when considering how the rural is referenced in the JRS. There is a strong tendency to associate places and sectors which recur in the overall JRS. Hence, the circumstances in which the term 'rural' appears are limited to agriculture and tourism, and the two phenomena that so characterise them, depopulation and ageing.

Language might play a factor. The term *chiiki* can be translated as region(al), local(ity), or area, depending on the context. The common Japanese term for 'rural' is *nōson*, literally agricultural villages, a heavy word which does not escape historical and cultural charges present in many other countries and linked to modernisation, and which can be combined with the word *chiiki* to indicate rural localities or regions. It is then impossible to ascertain whether the use of the word 'rural' in the English version of the JRS is meant to remark the presence of agricultural activities, in a form of circular argument where because the context discusses agriculture, the term rural is used. Regardless, in the JRS the rural is discussed as a form of 'society', a puzzling decision considering the reality of Japan as an advanced, diversified capitalist economy. Hence, despite its own acknowledgment that 100,000 people are flowing from rural areas to Tokyo each year because of the lack of 'attractive jobs' (Cabinet Office 2015), which hints at its minimum at the diversification of these areas' needs and ambitions, the government still caresses and renovates the vision of

> a rural *society* in which, while adequately and fully exerting multifaceted functions, agriculture, forestry and fisheries are converted into growth industries, and [in which] there is stronger collaboration between diverse main players such as young people, the elderly and companies and agriculture, forestry and fisheries, so that such society will be active and becomes a basis for creating innovation (Cabinet Office 2013).

Rural societies are then defined not by their actual composition but by the resources which surround them and their historical, socio-economic luggage, almost as if agriculture is still the organising principle of 'rural life' but in a contemporary version, where it is more than food production. This is a view which is also found outside the JRS. For example, the 2020 Census by the MAFF still uses the term 'rural community' when enacting policies. A rural community indicates a 'rural society formulated within the municipal area based on agriculture. The rural community is a fundamental unit of social life that formed various groups and social relationships, which was a spontaneously established local community with ties in territorial and blood relationships'(MAFF 2022). Hence, Japanese policy makers share very much socio-cultural definitions of the rural, based on a romantic view of the agricultural community. Even when discussing tourism, the agricultural heritage is the one to be emphasised, with plans to attract foreign tourists in the areas based on 'the savoring [of] fresh and fantastic delicacies and rich agricultural cultures … which will make it very enjoyable to take a trip in beautiful rural areas and Japanese nature and lifestyle' (Cabinet Office 2016). While undoubtedly 'rural' socio-economies possess natural treasures yet to be 'valued' (that is, priced), the fascination with the existence of a rural lifestyle runs deep through the JRS and helps carving the role of the state in these socio-economies as that of 'contributing to the preservation of beautiful, traditional rural villages, and maintaining and improving the food self-sufficiency rate and self-sufficiency capabilities' (2014). Hence, the detachment and interactions between the idea of the rural and the reality of the rural, what has pushed authors to see the rural as a social representation or an idea capable of shaping reality, is also traceable in the JRS. The rural is, essentially, still portrayed as an agricultural village.

What is not agricultural in rural socio-economies is adeptly cut from not only the discourse on the rural, but also from the definitions of its problems or from being targeted for measures. Be they called regional, rural, or local, since the first JRS measures intended for these broad groups of economies stress that their relaunch is based on two main strategic areas, agriculture and tourism, to which the identification of leading regional SMEs is added. Later on, after 2015, SMEs in the services and the healthcare sector were also included. With each JRS, measures become more targeted and the achievements of implemented measures are monitored. Nonetheless, there is no substantial rethinking about the major pillars which should sustain these economies (Table 15). The main drivers justifying the government's choices differ according to industry, and so does the type of government intervention. The heaviest, direct intervention is on agriculture, as the state posits that the decreasing farming population, ageing societies and deserted farmland constitute the top hindrances to rural revitalisation, so that altering the actual conditions of agriculture by making it competitive would turn it into an attractive industry for the young generation, one with 'weekends' and 'salaries'.

*Table 15: Evolution of Measures for Rural, Local and Regional Economies*

| Field | Key Measure Added / Year | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| ***Agriculture*** | - Increasing competitiveness by consolidation of farmland to motivated entities<br>- Promoting "AFFrinnovation" (the sixth industry)<br>- Formulating Export Promotion Strategy for each market and each item<br>- Globalization of Japanese food culture and food industries<br>- Improving agricultural, forestry and fishery products and advancing production and distribution systems by new technologies | - Reforming rice production adjustment<br>- Integrated reform of agricultural committee, agricultural production corporation and agricultures cooperatives<br>- Diversifying distribution channels for dairy products<br>- Promoting domestic and overseas value chains (sixth industry) and exports | - Improving the Support System to Strengthen Management Capabilities of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries<br>- Accelerating efforts toward farmland consolidation<br>- Promoting export of agricultural, forestry and fishery products as well as foods | - Enhancing functions of the public corporations for farmland consolidation to core farmers through renting and subleasing (Farmland Banks)<br>- Reducing cost of production materials and realising distribution/processing structures favourable to producers<br>- Developing human resources<br>- Reinforcing export<br>- Promoting "smart agriculture" (realizing unmanned automatic operation by remote monitoring by 2020)<br>- Building a system for cooperation between the agricultural and business communities |
| ***Tourism*** | - Cross-sectional planning and implementation of Visit Japan<br>- Promotion by relevant ministries, agencies and institutions<br>- Improving tourism environment (e.g. relaxing visa requirements and fastening entry procedures)<br>- Improving environment for foreign visitors to stay in Japan<br>- Creating new tourism<br>- Utilizing and concentrating industrial resources and establishing brands<br>- Creating and reinforcing the framework to attract more international conferences, etc.<br>- Inviting and hosting large scale international events | - Developing world-class attractive tourism areas<br>- Realizing private sector players' infrastructure management using PFI and PPP initiatives | - Establishing Japanese version of Destination Management/Marketing Organizations (DMOs) with intensive input of policy resources<br>- Improving tourism environment to accept the increasing number of foreign visitors to Japan, including through securing capacities of airports, transportations and accommodation facilities in each region | - Enhancing the attractiveness of tourism resources (opening the State Guest House to the public, utilising cultural assets and national parks)<br>- Revising tourism-related regulations and systems (expanding guide-interpreter services, etc.)<br>- Promoting and developing (DMOs)<br>- Developing tourism human resources<br>- Improving regional tourism environment for foreign visitors to Japan<br>- Promotion of taking leaves/ staggered holidays |

| Field | Key Measure Added / Year | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
| ***SMEs and Regional Revitalisation*** | - Promoting business start-ups by using and mobilizing regional resources<br>- Diversifying fund raising<br>- Creating premium regional brands<br>- Establishing "the Council on Regional Industrial Competitiveness"<br>- Consistent support from business start-up to the initial stage<br>- Revising the personal guarantee system<br>- Supporting business takeover and succession<br>- Building professional support system for moving into growth sectors<br>- Promoting the development of new sectors targeted for major companies and various business sectors<br>- Enhancing and strengthening hands-on support system<br>- Developing overseas support platforms | - Building a support platform to realize regional revitalization measures in one package<br>- "Hometown specialty support" led by regional SMEs and nurturing strategic industries led by regional medium-sized enterprises.<br>- Regional collaboration among primary, secondary and tertiary industries and dairy farmers' creativity<br>- Developing comprehensive policy promotion arrangements | - "Visualization of growth strategy" for business operators<br>- Strengthening business support system for mid-ranking companies and SMEs | - Supporting the growth of local core companies with an eye to the global market<br>- Supporting local SMEs' expansion to overseas by taking advantage of TPP.<br>- Support for improvement of productivity of mid-ranking companies, SMEs and microenterprises including IT utilization<br>- Promoting provision of growth funds which do not need collateral or a surety by using a "local benchmark," etc., enhancement of financing functions, and acceleration of business revitalization/succession |
| ***Services*** | - | - | - Enhancement of regional business support by SME organizations and financial institutions<br>- Development of activities to improve productivity of each service industry by public-private joint effort | - Creation of businesses leading the service industry's productivity improvement<br>- Productivity improvement by each business field<br>- Community-based productivity improvement through utilization of SME support providers, etc. |
| ***Healthcare*** | - | - Creating a non-profit holding company-type corporation system<br>- Providing individuals with incentives for health promotion and disease prevention<br>- Substantial expansion of the system for combining insured and uninsured medical services | - Support for the creation of next-generation healthcare industry<br>- International promotion of medical services<br>- Introduction of a numbering system in healthcare-related areas<br>- Promotion and widespread introduction of Regional Medical Information Cooperation Networks/Electronic health record<br>- Further promotion of data utilization in policy for medical care and similar fields | - |
| ***Local government*** | - | - | - | - Promotion of PPP/PFI |

This is a point to which we will turn again. The type of support provided by the state for tourism and SMEs is decisively more organisational and financially oriented and reliant on regional institutions for delivery, with the state 'accompanying' the initiatives of 'motivated communities'. Finally, mentions and measures for the healthcare sector focus on preventive care and on introducing systems for combining insured and uninsured medical services.

## 4.3 Joining ideal and material spaces: the NSSZs

The growth pillar of Abenomics has also a more defined territorial expression where state intervention in the rural can be observed in action, or where conceived space operates and meshes with concrete space to advance 'the devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived' (Lefebvre, 1980/2006, 10, cited in Wilson 2013, 366). These are the National Strategic Special Zones. The NSSZs present two spatial dimensions which are relevant for understanding notions of 'rural' space as being a constant conversation between the conceived, the perceived, and the lived: a mechanism for the generalisation of space — ideal spaces, and a mechanism for the particularisation of space — real places where 'things happen' and are observable, through the materialisation of an idea which channels its causal forces. The way the state shapes the rural thus emerges in its more physical attributes, as it selects concrete examples on what should be done in ideal types of socio-economies and proclaims specific measures and directions as desirable forms to pursue the revitalisation of the political economy.

This section shows the process from the generalisation to the particularisation of places. In particular, three points are explored. Firstly, it is shown how, although the NSSZs have been proposed as exceptional tools, they also have in themselves the germs for further abstraction. Secondly, it is possible to see how conception of space is dependent not only on ideas of space, but actual practices that become established within territories and within the political economy arrangements. Thirdly, the section shows how the state equates the rural and agriculture in practice, and the measures that are meant to give rural revitalisation a boost.

### 4.3.1 The NSSZs as laboratories for policy innovation: exceptional yet universal

A key notion to understand why the NSSZ can be thought of as one way in which the Japanese state attempts to regulate not only one rural area, but rural areas more in general is the concept of NSSZ as 'laboratories' for policy innovation. Since the 2013 JRS, NSSZs have been introduced in the overall plans for growth as one of the key measures 'to make Japan the best climate for doing business' (Keidanren 2013). Taking place at different scales (municipalities, prefectures, and regions), these experiments are meant to enable private economic agents to play a larger role in

the national economy by simulating the effects of the deregulation of strategic sectors or industries in designated areas before potential full roll-out.

NSSZs have been depicted as exceptional policy tools. They are expected to fast-track reforms and establish a system where the government, municipalities, and the private sector cooperate to carry out projects of substantial business attractiveness, especially for foreign investors. They have also been isolated from the rest of the growth measures to be patiently implemented in the mid-long term thanks to their disruptive and transformational nature (Table 16). As such, NSSZs are not only abstract visions and ambitions of what should be done to develop a socio-economy—embedding the history of why something is desirable at a certain moment, but concrete manifestations of what states can and are willing to do to realise a collective aim — containing how what is conceived as desirable and feasible by the state might take shape in different places.

*Table 16: The Exceptionality of the NSSZs in the JRS (2013-2016)*

| ***Year*** | ***References to the NSSZs*** |
|---|---|
| ***2013*** | • *Bringing 'an impact which could not be expected from the special zones that have been established to date'*<br>• *Bringing down 'bed-rock' regulations or 'taboo' sectors*<br>• *'A gateway for the execution of bold regulatory reform' and a 'powerful system to proceed with drastic regulatory reforms [making] a breakthrough as an experimental site'* |
| ***2014*** | • *'Core zones' demonstrating 'Japan's attitude on reforms'* |
| ***2015*** | • *Keys to 'improve the productivity of the Japanese economy as a whole [by] further opening of government-controlled markets to spur revitalisation of local economies* |
| ***2016*** | • *'Transformative attempts', requiring active efforts of the state 'to "visualise" concrete projects utilizing reform matters in an accelerated rate'* |

The design of the NSSZs, measures which were conceived in a context of opportunities for reform (Hoshi and Lipscy 2021), reflects also a new conceptualisation of state relationship with territories. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have already been used in the past as a form of territorial policy, in addition to many other policy tools carried out by different ministries. According to Tatsuo Hatta, a key advisor on deregulation for the project, however, the NSSZs are different from the numerous and still existing special zones present in Japan in two major and interrelated ways (*Japan Spotlight* 2015). Firstly, differently from the LDP's Structural Reform Special Zones of the Koizumi administration initiated in 2003, the national government, and not the regions, leads and promotes the reform areas to be undertaken (*Japan Spotlight* 2015; see also: Harada 2011), protected by its design from ministerial influences[27]. As such, they have an

[27] The organisational design of the NSSZs advanced by the Abe administration encapsulates the centralisation of power around the Cabinet Office, featuring a strong presence of the state and display of its capacities as well as the government's willingness to direct. Working Groups consisting of academics and industry leaders, under the direct supervision of the NSSZs Advisory Council chaired by the Prime Minister

element of imposition, or alternatively selective engagement, which portrays socio-economies as functional to the national political economy: without the national framework, this drive for inclusion of territories in state concerns disappears.

Secondly and relatedly, contrary to the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) Comprehensive Special Zones launched in 2009, the NSSZs were chosen to benefit the nation as a *whole*, rather than the growth and welfare of individual regions (*Japan Spotlight* 2015). NSSZs are exceptional policy tools for fostering and distributing growth consistently with notions of fiscal sustainability and the increased role of the private sector. They are instances of regulatory intervention (George-Mulgan 2005), whereby exceptions or relaxation of rules and regulations able to alter the nature of markets rather than financial support are provided to achieve a social or economic aim. Whatever localities might gain has to be generated through companies' engagement, which means that the evaluation of the NSSZ will eventually be dependent on companies' reception of the programme as well as the context. The current NSSZs are hence a step in the reconfiguration of the state's relationship with territories in terms of their dependence from financial transfers. Previous special zones had a more localised nature or aimed at localised effects, being proposed by regional or local authorities, and came with substantial central investments (*Nikkei Asia* 2014). In the case of the NSSZs, regions do not determine anymore their needs single-handedly but supposedly in a relational way to the entire socio-economy. The single locality does not matter: what measures can do if applied collectively does. The state is not willing, in short, to intervene to revitalise territories equally, and it is accepting that, under the current situation, some places will lose their vitality.

From their perspective, sub-national administrations work closely with Working Groups and the private sector to identify the most compelling problems and solutions *related to their reform area*, which might not necessarily be *the* problems local administrations have identified locally. The state chooses the problem arena and the policy objectives. NSSZs are not conceived to be, in other words, distributive tools, or usual territorial policies such as those handled at the regional or prefectural level, but 'laboratories' (*Japan Spotlight* 2015) for policy innovation based on the assumption that selected reforms should lead to economic and social outcomes, *perceivable and reproducible at various territorial levels*, although they might be understood differently from local

himself, negotiate which reforms to carry out with the regulating authorities, and the Advisory Council intervenes to negotiate with ministries when reaching stalemates. From the point of view of the state, the active involvement of influential public offices and the private sector allows to overcome or minimise conflicts about reforms of politically sensitive industries which ministries have opposed in the past, so that, *potentially*, NSSZs could explore features of territories which are not normally covered by relevant ministries.

governments[28]. So, as emphasised in the 2014 JRS, it is 'a top-down approach to *create reform models for the whole of Japan*' (2014, emphasis added). The state chooses what is good for the nation and uses specific areas as testing grounds with the idea of expanding the 'results' if such social experimentations are deemed successful. Therefore, not only the approach to the NSSZs is remarkably and purposefully top-down, with decision making tipping towards central, not local, authorities, shielded from the full influence of parliamentary politics, but the NSSZs, as laboratories, have the potential of establishing a *feedback system* extending to other areas through the capacity of the state, renovating the generalisation of places.

The NSSZs thus clearly possess the features of abstract space, a conceived space advanced by a powerful entity, meant not to value diversity, but to homogenise spaces and rationalise them as similar regardless of what they are or need.

### 4.3.2 Path dependency and trickle down effects: from ideas to policy areas and measures

Abstractions are not necessarily grounded only on ideal factors. Despite the fact that the NSSZs are experimental, the state is using the NSSZs to deal with its own past. Grandiose claims of the transformative mission of the NSSZs are brought back to reality by the evidently incremental nature of the measures proposed, whereby general notions of ideal spaces seen in the previous section are reproduced in the measures to be applied to concrete spaces. In this process too, there is no need for the real locality to be considered. The state reproduces spaces, or their position, as they were, despite changing its relations with them.

On the one hand, the state has re-established the idea of hierarchies of territories through the selection of the NSSZ. The order in which NSSZs were conceived reflects to a large extent the hierarchy of territories established in the JRS (Table 17): first came the reinforcement of 'the international competitiveness of large cities', to be 'dealt with preferentially' (Cabinet Office 2013), and only secondly came awareness of the need to 'achieve a balanced growth between big cities and the regions' (Hatta 2013). In the 2013 JRS, neither agriculture nor SMEs (i.e. key regional areas for economic development) are explicitly considered as reform areas for the NSSZs, while tourism enters the conversation as the continuation of the special treatment of Okinawa (Harada 2011).

[28] At the local level, the lack of alternatives is an important factor to motivate localities to cooperate with the national government. For instance, Yabu city seems driven more by the desperate search for any measure to revitalise rural areas and attract funds, rather than being particularly invested in agriculture only. As Mayor Hirose declared in 2015, 'even if [agricultural reforms] fail, there is nothing to lose' (Tomoyuki 2015).

*Table 17: Evolution of the National Strategic Special Zones*

| AMENDMENTS OF THE NATIONAL STRATEGIC SPECIAL ZONES ACT | DETAILS ON THE DESIGNATION OF ZONES |
|---|---|
| December 7, 2013: enactment of the National Strategic Special Zones Act<br><br>- *One-stop system for procedures related to the City Planning Act and others*<br>- *Special provisions regarding the division of duties between agricultural committees and municipalities and others*<br><br>**May 1, 2014 : First designation**<br><br>July 15, 2015 Amendment to the Act<br><br>- *Start-up visa*<br>- *Area-limited childcare workers and others* | ***First designation (revised by Cabinet Order in May 2014***<br><br>- Tokyo area: international business and innovation centre<br>- Kansai area: Medical and other innovation centres, support for challenging human resources<br>- Niigata City: Centre for Large-scale agricultural reform<br>- Yabu City: Centre for agricultural reform in hilly and mountainous areas<br>- Fukuoka City: Centre for employment system reform for business creation<br>- Okinawa Prefecture: Centre for International Tourism |
| **August 28, 2015: Second designation** | ***Secondary designation (referred to as Regional Revitalisation Zones )***<br><br>- Semboku City: Reform centre for 'exchange in agriculture and forestry, and medicine'<br>- Sendai City: Reform centre for 'women's activities and social entrepreneurship'<br>- Aichi Prefecture: Comprehensive reform centre to 'foster the leaders of industry' in education, employment, agriculture, and others |
| **January 29, 2016 Third designation**<br><br>June 3, 2016 Amendment of the Act<br><br>- *Remote medication counselling*<br>- *Acquisition of agricultural land by private corporations and others*<br><br>June 23, 2017 Amendment of the Act<br><br>- *Acceptance of Cool Japan Foreign Specialists, employment promotion*<br>- *Expansion of the age range for small-scale licensed childcare centres and others*<br><br>June 3, 2020 Amendment to the Act<br><br>- *Development of a system to realize the concept of 'super city'.*<br>- *Establishment of an area-limited regulatory sandbox system*<br>- *Establishment of disqualifying factors for private lodging in special zones (excluding gangs, etc.) and others*<br><br>May 19, 2021 Amendment to the Law<br><br>- *Extension of special exception for acquisition of agricultural land by joint stock companies, and others*<br>- *Establishment of special exceptions to regulations on the location of factories and others* | ***Third designation (referred to as Regional Revitalisation Zones)***<br>- Chiba City (Tokyo metropolitan area): Establishment of a "multi-cultural city for demonstrating near-future technologies<br>- Imabari City, Hiroshima Prefecture: Special zone for international exchange and utilization of big data<br>- Kitakyushu City (Fukuoka City, Kitakyushu City): Responding to a declining and ageing population by enhancing the activities of elderly people and nursing care services |

Translated from: (Cabinet Office 2021)

Only since the second designation of the NSSZs in 2015 after the launch of Local Abenomics has the representation of regional economies become more important, and NSSZs have become known as 'Regional Revitalisation Zones'. Despite statements that warn against the excessive concentration of population in the major metropolitan areas and the quick realisation of the initial bias, the first beneficiaries of state's attention have been the economically most advanced regions and the ones still growing in terms of population, and only successively have regional economies been considered.

Exploring the contents, it is also possible to retrace how the associations between territories and sectors delineated in the JRS are projected into the NSSZs. Of the ten NSSZs elected in three successive rounds (2014-2016), only two, Yabu City in Hyogo Prefecture and Semboku City in Akita Prefecture, are categorised as rural areas, and specifically hilly and mountainous areas, and, coherently with the 'guidelines' set by the JRS for regional revitalisation in rural 'societies', both sites were chosen for intervention in the agricultural sector, as was Niigata city for larger scale agriculture. Although it might be expected that such coupling is based on real competitive advantages or specific contributions of the reform area for such socio-economies, this is not necessarily the case. Hilly and mountainous areas are identified as *disadvantaged* in agricultural production (see: Chapter 2). In comparison, and regardless of the specific performance of the programmes, the NSSZs in the metropolitan areas of Tokyo or the Kansai area focus respectively on international business and innovation and the advanced medical sector – leading areas for growth and innovation. There is nothing surprising in the way reform areas were distributed: even potential minor variations, such as promoting Yabu as a touristic region, are simply not found. The NSSZs hence do not attempt to discover or develop an alternative rural: they pre-establish it, using a tunnel-vision which is dictated not by the actual problems of the socio-economies hosting the reforms, but by the actual problems the state sees in rural socio-economies.

### 4.3.3 Creating a connection between agriculture and the rural

The NSSZs, as laboratories for policy innovation, are formulated around long-standing problematics of the Japanese political economy and the historical relationship that the state has had with rural areas. Plainly put, none of the four versions of the JRS directly mentions the rationale behind the choice of agriculture for reform or precise indications on what agriculture should do for rural areas. Occasional normative claims appear around the purported role of agriculture, such as that it '*should* become a competitive attractive industry to play a role in driving regional economies' autonomous development' (Strategy 2014, emphasis added), but the nature of the JRS is such that, rather than explicit mentions, the reasons for such emphasis on agriculture are to be inferred by relating it to what is known about the state-rural relationship.

The JRS does identify and portray agriculture as a panacea for rural problems and regional revitalisation, especially after 2014. In the 2013 JRS the state strongly emphasised economic motives to strive for 'an aggressive agriculture', able to exploit its export potential and the connections among industries through the Sixth Industrialisation (primary sector X secondary sector X third sector) (Cabinet Office, 2013). The concept of agriculture in the JRS is indeed blurry. The way an aggressive agriculture is to be achieved is by increasing productivity through the concentration of land in the hands of those with a market-driven mindset to achieve economies of scale and the professionalisation of agriculture. The following strategies stress more the benefits for localities at the social level. A strong agriculture should incentivise the return of the young generations to rural areas and allow the doubling of farmers' incomes, the preservation of traditional rural villages, and the increase of food self-sufficiency (2014; 2016)), as well as serve as 'the backbone of employment' as one of the 'community-based industries'[29](Cabinet Office 2015, 2016). The introduction of automated agriculture is also mentioned as a possible solution to turn agriculture into an attractive occupation for the young and women (Cabinet Office 2016). Such depictions equate a successful agriculture to a prosperous rural society, appealing to the perceptions of places and their materiality, and excluding alternative visions of emerging or not so immediate characteristics. Despite motivating numbers[30], the agricultural sector still accounted for only 1.2 percent of the GDP and 3.2 percent of the total employment in 2018 (OECD 2021b). Nonetheless, the state portrays agricultural reforms as an important cure to rural problems.

It is not only opportunities that have driven agriculture to be identified as a growth sector for regional/rural/local socio-economies. Rather than agriculture being particularly good for rural socio-economies, the impression is that the state is attempting to dismantle the 1955 system and what survived of it in the agricultural system. Agriculture is the last bastion closely linking rural socio-economies and the state, and, as it was seen, JA is a masterpiece on the chess table. The JRS mentions that the lack of competitiveness of the sector is posited to be due to 'serious structural

[29] The others are as mentioned above: forestry and fisheries, tourism, and healthcare.

[30]The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) points out that, whereas the overall number of farming entities dropped, the number of farming corporations increased, so that the number of farmers under long-term employment grew by 9 percent from 2015 to 2018 to 240,000 employees (USDA 2019a). Involvement of the young generation (under 49) is also bringing benefits to the sector: 45 percent of the young farm commercial households (10 percent of the total) earns more than £65,000 per year, 73 percent manages more than 10 hectares of land, and young farmers in some industries, such as rice and dairy farming, work less hours, invest more in capital, and tend to prefer direct sales than non-young farm commercial households (MAFF 2018). Moreover, the nationwide Young Farmers' Fund, established in 2012 to prevent farmland abandonment, increase rural population and guarantee a stable domestic supply of food, attracted over 43,000 under 45s by 2017 (McGreevy, Kobayashi, and Tanaka 2018), helped by generous financial support of up to £10,500 annually for receiving or providing agricultural-related training and setting up of enterprises (OECD 2021b), thus indicating a small but encouraging interest in considering agriculture as a career.

problems *including* declining population of farmers, progress in ageing and increasing deserted farmland' (2013, emphasis added). Continuous references and the number of measures related to the need for consolidating land, for supporting 'the earnest farmers' with 'a business mindset' and the 'entry of diverse players', for intervening on the cost of agricultural inputs and increasing the localities' role in the management of land and for reviewing the rice production adjustment system[31] help complement what is *excluded* from the uncited structural factors impeding agriculture from becoming a growth sector: JA and rural-organised interests. Many agriculture-related reforms proposed since the 2014 JRS and in the NSSZs are efforts at redimensioning JA's role in agricultural affairs, including the establishment at the prefectural level of new Farmland Banks (formally known as Farmland Intermediary Management Organizations) to facilitate land consolidation at the local level [32].

Importantly, these are also the measures which were experimented and deepened in Yabu. Of the extensive reform menu presented (Table 18 and 19), the core items of the NSSZ are only three. The first one is a measure which allows to transfer land more easily by changing the approval process for land transactions to the Mayor (Item 1). This measure is meant to signal the end of 'the notion that farmland is a matter of agricultural communities" and the beginning of farmland as "a commercial good" ' (Tashiro 2014, 8; cited in Jentzsch 2017, 37–38)[33]. The second measure (Item 2) decreases the need for farmers' representation in the Board of Directors and favours the establishment of agricultural corporations. This possibility was first limited to the NSSZs in Yabu and Niigata and was later expanded nationwide in 2016. It aims at diversifying agricultural bearers to allow those with a business mindset to participate in agriculture, changing in the definition of agriculture from farming to the full agricultural supply chain and farming-related industries (the Sixth Industrialisation). The third measure (Item 8) allows general corporations ('corporations other than corporations qualified to own farmland') to *own* land. From an ideological point of view, this seems an even more significant concession to the land-to-the-tiller principle than the lease of land. Because of its sensitivity, the measure was limited to Yabu and has been initially granted for a trial period of 5 years under the conditions that the municipality can confiscate the land if not put in productive use and that

[31] The rice production adjustment system maintains the price of rice based on a production cartel that restricts the total amount of domestic staple food rice for sale in the market. In 2013, the system was revised to cancel both the direct payments introduced by the previous administration and production targets for rice. Nonetheless, it increased the rice acreage reduction subsidy for producing rice for feed use, essentially continuing subsidising rice farmers (Yamashita 2018; Honma and George Mulgan 2018).

[32] The measures include integrated reforms of Agricultural Committees, of agricultural production corporations, and the separation of the functions of agricultural cooperatives (see: USDA 2019b).

[33] The transfer or assignment of land rights would normally be entrusted to Agricultural Committees, often connected to JA. In the case of Yabu city, on top of the measures implemented nationwide, such as the establishment of Farmland Banks, the Mayor has been able to control the process of assigning of agricultural land.

companies need to restore it to the original conditions in case of return, but all the companies had their contracts renewed in 2021.

*Table 18: Reform Menu 1 of the NSSZ in Yabu*

| **YABU CITY – SITUATION ON THE APPLICATION OF THE REGULATORY REFORM MENU (1)** | |
|---|---|
| **1** | Promotion of farmland mobilisation by new role sharing between the Agricultural Affairs Committee and the City Office |
| | Contents<br>*Based on the agreement between Yabu City and the Yabu City Agricultural Committee, the Mayor of Yabu City will be in charge of all the affairs of the Committee concerning the establishment or transfer of the rights listed in the main clause of Article 3, Paragraph 1 of the Agricultural Land Law for agricultural land in the whole area of Yabu City.* |
| | Aims<br>• Regeneration of abandoned land<br>• Promotion of the mobilisation of farmland |
| | Achievements<br>• 09 Sept 2014: The first accredited project among the six areas of the first NSSZ designations.<br>• Reduction of the average administrative time: from 18.3 days to 6.8 (2016), to 5.8 (2017)<br>• Increase in the number of permissions: 2014 (35), 2015 (64), 2016 (48), 2017 (71)<br>o 202 permissions between 2014-2017, approximately 26.9 ha of land<br>• Relaxation of the requirements to obtain land: It is possible to acquire farmland attached to vacant houses even if it is less than 10 are (1000 square meters) |
| **2** | Relaxation of the requirements for directors in farming corporations (Promotion of the Sixth Industry) |
| | Contents<br>*Corporations engaged in agriculture and related businesses (processing, sales, etc.) shall be treated in the same way as agricultural production corporations, provided that they have one director engaged in agricultural work.*<br>*Art 2 of the Agricultural Land Law* |
| | Aims<br>• Promote the 6th industrialization of agricultural production corporations |
| | Achievements<br>• National expansion of the Special Provision by revision of the Agricultural Land Law in April 2016<br>• The investment ratio from non-agricultural directors has been raised from 25% maximum to 50% maximum<br>• Since March 2016, 11 companies have been established as agricultural production corporations<br>• 70 ha of land managed by 13 corporations (2016: 11.6 ha; 2017: 27.2 ha; 2018: 39.4 ha), of which 43,2 ha were previously uncultivated or abandoned cultivated land<br>• Creation of 95 jobs (2020); (85 in 2018; 36 in 2017)<br>• Approx. 260 million yen in agricultural output (Approx. 16% of Yabu City's agricultural output) |
| | Future proposals<br>• Increase the investment ratio from non-agricultural directors to more than 50%<br>• Allow the former even when the sales other than agricultural sales are more than 50% |

| | |
|---|---|
| **3** | Measures for the establishment of farmers' restaurants in agricultural land (Promotion of the Sixth Industry) |
| | Contents:<br>*It is possible for farmers to set up a restaurant in the agricultural land area as a business facility that provides agricultural and livestock products produced mainly in the same city or town, or products manufactured and processed from such products.* |
| | Aims<br>• Promote the Sixth Industry, increase income, and secure employment |
| | Achievements<br>• Opening of a farmer's restaurant |
| **4** | Use of agricultural credit guarantee system (Facilitating fund procurement) |
| | Contents<br>*Those engaged in farming can apply to a Credit Guarantee System similar to that used in Commerce and Industry* |
| | Achievements<br>• Establishment of the Yabu City Agri Special Zone Guarantee Loan Program<br>• 12 loans totalling 14.2 million yen (£910,000) (2018); 15.2 million yen (2020) |
| **5** | Special Exemption to the Hotel Business Act for Historic Buildings (Regional Revitalisation) |
| | Contents:<br>*In the business of accommodating people in a building with high historical value or a group of traditional buildings that form a historical landscape in unison with the surrounding environment, the installation of an entrance hall is relaxed.* |
| | Achievements<br>• Renovation of a historic building used as a ryokan |

*Table 19: Reform Menu 2 of the NSSZ in Yabu*

**YABU CITY – SITUATION ON THE APPLICATION OF THE REGULATORY REFORM MENU (2)**

| | |
|---|---|
| **6** | Special exemption to regulations on the Law Concerning Stabilization of Employment of Older Persons |
| | Contents<br>*Elders at the Silver Human Resources Centre are allowed to work 40 hours per week (previously 20) when engaging in jobs offered through the worker dispatch and fee-charging job-placement services.*<br>** Implemented by the NPO Association of Silver Human Resources Centres (Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture)* |
| | Achievements<br>• Expanded nationwide<br>• Maximum weekly working hours for members: 29 hours in 2020 (31 hours in 2018)<br>• Number of members who worked 20 hours or more per week: 20 in 2020 (21 in 2018)<br>• Number of dispatched working members: 47 in 2020 (FY 2018: 54) |
| **7** | Special exemption to the Law to Promote Specified Non-profit Activities to accelerate procedures for the establishment of NPOs |
| | Contents<br>*Hyogo Prefecture, as the competent authority, will facilitate the establishment of NPOs by shortening the period for reviewing the application documents in the certification procedure for the establishment of NPOs from one month to two weeks.* |

| | |
|---|---|
| **8** | Special exemption for the acquisition of farmland by corporations (Special exemption to the Law on Agricultural Land) [Extended in 2021] |
| | Contents<br>*In the case of "corporations other than corporations qualified to own farmland" that intend to acquire farmland and run a farm business, a special exception to allow them to acquire farmland will be established as a time-limited measure for the next five years if certain requirements are met.* |
| | Aims<br>• Eliminate the shortage of farmers and abandoned cultivated land<br>• By owning land, it is possible to use all the functions of farming<br>• Business development rooted in the region over the long-term |
| | Achievements<br>• Three companies from the special agricultural corporation and two new entrants acquired farmland<br>Total farmland acquired: 1.64 (2020); 1.35 ha (2018) |
| **9** | Special exemption for medical advice via video call (Special exemption to the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Device Law) |
| | Contents<br>*As an exception to the principle of face-to-face medication guidance by pharmacists for medicines prescribed by telemedicine, it will be possible to receive medication guidance remotely via videophone.* |
| | Recent developments: conducted experiments for the delivery of goods via drones (link; link; link)<br>• Status of registration for online medical treatment and guidance<br>○ Number of registrations: 2 medical institutions, 3 dispensing pharmacies (expanding sequentially) |
| **10** | Expansion to the use of private cars in depopulated areas as taxis (Special exemption to the Road Transport Law) |
| | Contents<br>*A system mainly targeting tourists. The business area is determined by the Resolution of the NSSZ council, after conference among local parties* |
| | Achievements<br>• NPO Yabu my-car<br>• Number of cases used: 305 cases (2019)<br>• Number of days in operation in 2019: 169 (transportation started on May 26, 2018) |

Data from: Local Revitalisation and National Special Strategic Zones: Yabu's challenge (paper version, in Japanese) and (Yabu City 2019)

Proponents of this measure argue that, by owning farmland, corporations can be recognised as 'members of the community' and can feel safe in carrying out improvements in the land without the fear of losing their investments (Yabu City Hall 2019). By insisting on the management and capitalisation of existing, land-based resources, the state reproduces at the local level its view of rural socio-economies as agricultural productive sites or conservation sites. The measures are premised on the fact that better utilisation of land will promote revitalisation, and that agriculture is the sector elected to do so. Agriculture is, so to say, different from the rest of the sectors, as if agriculture and agriculture-related sectors seem to have a 'something' which enables them to better provide for the future of the numerous local socio-economies.

However far away the measures proposed might seem from the problems of demographic and economic decline in rural areas, these were the measures that should aid the revitalisation of rural socio-economies. As a laboratory for policy innovation, an experiment in social engineering, the workings of the NSSZ in Yabu — how the measures will be implemented, the outcomes they will have and the same value of agriculture for revitalisation — should provide a *feedback system* for further evaluation and application in rural areas found in all the territory. Yabu should represent the so-called hilly and mountainous areas, regarded as the core of rural policy in Japan (Ando 2020)[34]. The idea is that, if agriculture can work in Yabu, it can work in other rural areas too.

The official stance of Yabu City to focus on agriculture as a 'key industry of the city' is that it is taking measures to counteract the estimated depopulation of the area, which is supposed to drop from about 24000 inhabitants in 2018 to 10000 in 2060, of which 46% are estimated to be elders (Fujita 2018). The two overarching aims it sets to achieve through its participation in the NSSZ are, respectively, to promote the mobilisation of agricultural land and the securing of diverse agricultural 'bearers', and to link the promotion of agriculture and industry to settlement (Yabu City Hall, 2019), in line with the government's vision for the future of rural areas in the JRS. Although a 2019 review of the programme presents both the tough numbers on the situation of the local agricultural sector and on the ageing of farmers and abandonment of land[35], Yabu has not made explicit how exactly agriculture and rural revitalisation are supposed to be connected. Hence, the next findings section will concentrate on how the theory of state on rural revitalisation through agriculture works out in a real setting.

[34] For policy making purposes, rural areas are defined as all areas which are not urban, or those areas which do not reach a certain population density. Rural areas are then divided in plain, hilly and mountainous areas.
[35] Agricultural land has decreased from 3012 hectares in 1960 to 1520 in 2015, while the amount of cultivable but abandoned land increased from 25.8 hectares in 2008 to 85.7 in 2012. Relatedly, the total farming population (both commercial and non-commercial households) dropped from 6014 households to 2398 in the same period. Of the commercial households (approximately 1/3 of the total farming population), those deriving their main income from agriculture dropped from 173 in 1995 to 83 in 2015, and those engaged in agriculture as a secondary activity also halved in the same period from 1802 to 895. Yabu farmers' age exceeds those of the prefecture and the country by 2-3 years, with subsistence farmers' average age at 70.9 years, that of those engaging in agriculture as a profession at 69.4 and that of agricultural workers at 61.9. The overwhelming majority of households, 93.2%, manages fields that are less than 1.5ha, which makes not only profitable agriculture a far goal, but also indicates that agriculture is entrenched in the local fabric as a non-economic activity. Within the overall economy, agriculture only accounts for 2.5 percent of the total production of the city, although the local government estimates that the regeneration of 80 hectares of abandoned but cultivable land could produce 840 million yen (£5.464.000) in agricultural output value (Yabu City Hall 2019).

## 4.4 Recap of the chapter

The chapter has attempted to demonstrate how the process by which space is conceived by the state takes place by investigating the formation of the NSSZs, and in particular the NSSZ in Yabu. The main aim was to support the claim that although there might not be rural socio-economies in general, there are ways in which the concept of rural can have consequences for the general population.

What was found is that, although the JRS largely appears aspatial, the state has different expectations on the capacity and role of urban and rural socio-economies. Such expectations are built on conceived space, as in the JRS, the state creates space at the abstract, ideal level without references to any type of descriptor or places. These representation of space influence how the state structures its own responsibilities, in what can be called a hierarchy of territories. In particular, the further a socio-economy is placed from metropolitan regions, the more the private sector is expected to play an active role in revitalisation and the less state intervention is proactive. Importantly, the state also identifies desirable routes for how non-urban economies should develop by delineating specific sectors posited to favour their revitalisation. In the case of the rural, strong associations are found that re-propose the idea of rural 'societies' as agricultural societies. Hence, the rural as conceived by the state seems to be defined by a forced need for autonomy and self-help, as well as by an emphasis on the productive capacity of agriculture. The state defines territories around a single criterion: how they contribute to the economic system.

Moreover, it was advanced that NSSZs are gates through which the state attempts to shape the concrete, spatial practices by introducing new measures meant to alter not only the way the agricultural sector produces, but also its relationship with rural areas. Yabu constitutes the link between the rural and the rurals, constructed by exploiting the capacity of the state to impose or propose certain values and views on territories. In theory, because of the particular historical moment and the organisational design of the NSSZs as a top-down, experimental approach, the state could use NSSZs to think outside the box and revise its own preconceptions of territories. Nonetheless, the state reproposes the generalisations found in the JRS, based on the history of its relationship with rural socio-economies, and applies its own recipe to foster the revitalisation of various areas. Hence, in the case of rural socio-economies, agriculture is the chosen sector, with the stated reasons that it would benefit rural societies. However, looking at the references and the measures proposed, what emerges is that the state is capitalising on the moment to undermine the last bastion linking state and specific territories by changing the foundational institutions which have sustained the relationship.

From the point of view of the state, the NSSZ in Yabu is thus as much a political statement of intentions as a test for economic reforms with national implications. This is the wider significance of the NSSZ in Yabu for the Japanese political economy and the state. It is, as it was mentioned before, a laboratory to visualise how such new relationships can be forged in a 'protected', experimental environment. Such relationships are economic as much as they are political. Behind the association between the rural and agriculture in the NSSZ there is then a long history of mutating and updating institutions which had been largely untouched throughout the history of the Japanese political economy system. From the point of view of the agricultural sector, these are times of opportunities. Nonetheless, from the point of view of how the state conceives the rural and acts upon it, agrarian institutions function as constraints, links to be cut. This is surely one of the ways in which the state shapes rural resilience: by attaching the destiny of the rural to the destiny of agriculture, engaging-to-disengage from agriculture, the state ignores all the other ways in which socio-economies can be renewed. Its insistence in solving agricultural problems seems to exclude alternatives.

# 5. The Rural and Agriculture: Conceived, Perceived, Lived

## 5.1 Introduction to Chapter

Chapter 4 advanced that the NSSZs represent not only space as conceived by the state, but also attempts to shape concrete, spatial practices and remake rural space by introducing measures meant to alter the way the agricultural sector produces as well as the relationship of the state with rural socio-economies, in the plural. Yabu is the concrete space, the locality, where the state project should start to be realised. This chapter continues with the focus on the conceived rural by looking at how attempts to realise the state's project encounter private economic agents' visions. It does so by hinging upon the REF's concepts of mechanisms, contexts and outcomes. Hence, the chapter shows how companies interpret and act upon the measures proposed and their relevance for rural revitalisation, the mechanisms of the programmes. Following, the chapter tackles how companies interpret their environment, highlighting the contextual elements of the policy. A last area of exploration concerns how companies are shaping the rural through their actions and understanding. Explanations on the sample included in this findings section and the relative analysis are found in Section 3.3.2 and Section 3.3.2.3.

## 5.2 Who benefits the most from the NSSZ and how?

As it was seen, the NSSZ programme revolves around three core policy items: easier entry in agriculture by relaxing the requirements for establishing agricultural corporations, easier transfer of land by removing the influence of JA on land transactions, and the possibility for general corporations to own land. Although the programme does not specify how the items are connected to revitalisation or how they should benefit rural areas, the reforms in the NSSZ should incentivise motivated bearers to utilise dormant resources and so revitalise the area. Moreover, the removal of these impediments should help build the premise for rural revitalisation in other places, based on the notion of reproducibility of the 'Yabu model'. Nonetheless, as this section seeks to evidence, the NSSZs mostly benefit a specific group of companies, newly founded corporate agricultural companies, while leaving unattended the needs of the majority of producers.

Companies participating in the NSSZ are not all considered at the same level or having the same meaning for the local administration. Collectively, NSSZ companies have extremely diverse backgrounds in terms of ownership, management, place of origin, and number of employees. Such variety is not a coincidence, but rather reflects some contradictions that localities need to confront. On the one hand, participants report that the Yabu administration was pressured by the

national government to implement reforms favouring larger players and new entrants, mostly outsiders. Companies were invited by the Yabu local administration to participate in the programme, and the commitment and time of the municipal government was paramount for the successful entry of new players. The preference for more capitalised companies is made explicit in documentation on the programme, which clearly states the interest of the city in companies with 'capital and technological capabilities in agriculture' (Yabu City 2019), the same characteristic the traditional local agricultural sector lacks. According to several 'local' participants, the main reason for their inclusion in the NSSZ is that the programme would look too biased if only 'non-local' companies were invited to participate:

> There is no local company that is an agricultural corporation in Yabu. The big companies such as Company 1, 3, and 4, they entered in the special zone … from outside. Yabu really wanted a local corporation. The mayor asked [me] to make it in Yabu. If you make this very public, you can't say so much... But there was actually such a reason (Participant intentionally omitted).

Secondly and relatedly, there are differences in *which* companies report benefits from their participation in the programme. The major beneficiaries of state intervention are the few companies which will be referred to as corporate agricultural producers[36]. These are large-scale and/or capital-intensive agricultural operations, backed by Japanese corporations, with non-local decision-making and financial control and local managers in charge of the running of what can effectively be defined as productive sites. Corporate agricultural producers share a positive attitude towards the reform measures that does not surface in the conversations with other NSSZ companies. The easiness to set up the corporations, to transfer funds, to have products promoted, and the possibility to access subsidies[37] were major reasons motivating the corporate sector to invest in Yabu specifically:

> This is a special area called the National Strategic Special Zone, so … there is a relaxation of conditions to set up an agricultural production corporation. First of all, that is an advantage. The other one is that under the usual agricultural regulation, the share of capital cannot be more than half, … but within this National Strategic Special Zone, there is no limit, so we were able to receive a lot of money from the parent company. That's the merit. […] In addition, the local administration says that there are some merits by working with them. And our activities are being promoted to the outside (P3).

[36]The dimensions of these operations pale compared to international standards of agricultural producing countries, and should be understood relative to the context. There are indeed massive food corporations in Japan which have long been active in the global food system (Okada 2015), such as general trading companies (*sogo-shosha*) importing agricultural goods and establishing food production bases abroad to guarantee stable food supplies for a country with decreasing rates of self-sufficiency (Hiraga 2018). Nonetheless, outside the Northern prefecture of Hokkaido, domestic production by corporations has not only been constrained by rigid regulations, but also by the fact that Japan does not have a comparative advantage in agriculture because it is not a land-rich country (Yamashita 2006). As noted by Godo (2007), agribusiness stock companies have participated in the market before the various rounds of deregulation/reregulation by making special contracts with farmers without setting up agricultural production legal entities as affiliated companies.

[37] There are no subsidies directly annexed to the NSSZ in Yabu. Nonetheless, becoming an agricultural production corporations allows access to the variety of subsidies devised for agricultural producers. As such, they are dependent on the type of investments made by the company.

In these cases, state intervention can be said to have provided a specific benefit to Yabu. These companies have mobile capital and have decided to invest it in the agricultural sector in Yabu because of the new set of incentives. As Participant 14 candidly stated, 'I imagine it's about the subsidy, and the special zone allowed corporations to enter with less hurdles. I don't think it would have been necessary for Company 14a to enter this business exclusively in Yabu'. Even the short time gap before the relaxation of measures for general corporations to enter agriculture was expanded nationwide in 2016 functioned as a competitive advantage for Yabu, and, conversely, a lack of advantage for neighbouring Asago or other similar areas. This advantage was, however, time dependent. As a matter of fact, after the first round of companies set before 2016, no other companies entered in Yabu (P10). Only by granting an exceptional status would companies be attracted, thus starting to break down the assumptions that the programme's results can be replicated.

Outside corporate producers, the mechanisms of the programme seem to lack any significance. Partially because there was not much clarity about what the programme entailed precisely (P18), most NSSZ participants had expectations that some advantages would derive from the programme. Nonetheless, as hopes for subsidies vanished, non-corporate companies struggled to identify real benefits, to the point that they 'never realised the difference' between participating or not in the NSSZ (P10), felt ashamed of 'thinking in a greedy way' about subsidies (P6) and affirmed that 'there is absolutely no connection' between the company's success and the NSSZ (P3). The total lack of effect for local companies was echoed by participants in the research outside the agricultural sector in both Yabu and Asago: there are no new distribution channels, alternative uses of land are ignored, there is no cooperation among sectors, and for the majority of citizens, things went on as before. The only good thing was the promotion of the locality, reflecting the harsh reality of small places: 'Yabu City is an area that wouldn't be noticed if there wasn't something going on' (P10). People and businesses expect the administration to serve the wider problematics of the locality, rather than the will of the national government. Although leading (non-local) companies to operate in Yabu, only for one group does state intervention help realising aims and constitutes a real advantage, that of corporate companies.

Aside from favouring the entry of participants, the programme focused on the transfer and acquisition of agricultural land as a means to favour revitalisation. What was found is that only under specific circumstances it is important for the local administration to act as an intermediary to obtain land, when companies investing in agriculture are non-locals. Participant 10, a self-identified social entrepreneur, could not easily rent land in Yabu, although only thirty kilometres separate the company's main premises from the city. There seems to be, in the local system, a certain stiffness and rigidity in accepting the new which prescinds from why they would like to

access land. To this extent, state intervention might help non-local companies gain access to rural resources and their utilisation.

Similarly, state intervention is also seen as a necessity to break the effects of the legacy of the land property system established in the post-war period, 'an anachronism in this present era' (P14). However, NSSZ companies did not stress the transfer of land as a source of trouble, as the state had already improved mechanisms to consolidate farmland. Farmland banks, available nationwide, have been extremely helpful for some companies, even local ones having access to informal channels to obtain land (P31):

> The Farmland Consolidation Management mechanism … is a system that lends the farmland that it has consolidated from individual owners. We were able to borrow the land from the government all at once. This is incredibly efficient. […] The country has collectively borrowed, and it has asked our parent company to produce agricultural products here. This is how it is organized. The rice fields have been consolidated which means that machines do not need to be moved, the next rice field is next to the other rice field, and it is more efficient to do the task. The country is aiding with the efficiency (P3).

However, fields are also fragmented because hilly and mountainous land is morphologically complex, and within the administrative boundaries of localities, previous village units do not enjoy the same levels of success. Participant 13, operating in hospitality, remarked that the NSSZs were not benefitting Yabu as a whole, as, for example, Northern villages, where mountains are higher and forests denser, have not seen any new entrants, despite their landscapes being used for promotional materials. Moreover, companies have expressed doubts about land being sufficient to sustain revitalisation: 'there will be a lot of excitement if the number of local people increases, but the land in Yabu is quite mountainous, there are only a few places with [agricultural] land, and it would be more troublesome if there were a lot of people participating in [agriculture]' (P18). The reality of geography cannot be escaped.

The flagship item for the Yabu NSSZ, the ownership of agricultural land by companies, was the least appreciated. The assumption that owning land will incentivise further investments, which was the economic logic officially promoted in the post-war land reform to boost productivity, does not apply in places where the land value is too low, and renting is more convenient than owning (see quotation in Table 20). What led companies to purchase land was a sense of duty, because it was 'the right thing to do' to show commitment to the local government, because 'there is a story from the Cabinet Office to special operators like us to tell us to buy land' (Participants intentionally omitted). Safeguarding the fields, increasing profits, and the scare of wasteful investments, none of these things is significant. Although local administrations might wish to lift some of the burdens of taking care of abandoned fields from their shoulders, private economic agents do not list economic reasons to purchase agricultural land.

*Table 20: On the purchase of farmland: Full Excerpt*

| |
|---|
| Buying farmland is not the aim, rather an instrument. We didn't desire to have the farmland in the first place. Those who want farmland could just rent it. Someone even proposed it. Others told us that we wouldn't need to go as far as to buy it since we could have lent it, and for free. They came to me imploring that we used their land. You see, we could have done perfectly without buying this land, honestly. However, being the city of Yabu an agricultural special economic zone, we chose to buy the land to show the value of our actual achievements to the government. You see, I cannot say it publicly, but with the land purchase, our company showed everyone that it is really promoting agriculture around here. In other words, we don't have a direct gain from this. Regarding the steps needed for a company to enter in the farming sector easily, for a company to have land is a hindrance in the first place. It is better to rent it. Now, when I think that our first mission is to stop field abandonment, in other words, to convince the people that are gradually leaving the farms to stay and avoid somehow that fields are turned into unproductive land, I realise that this issue was not our priority when we discussed about purchasing the land or not. My main preoccupation was to find a way in which the company could use the land easily with the sole aim to use it (Participant intentionally omitted). |

The lack of interest is clearer when considering that the total purchased land under the programme is 1.21 hectares, out of more than 31 hectares of open fields or greenhouses accessed by interviewed participants under other conditions, such as business partners providing for it or rent [38]. Even in agricultural-related business (outside the agricultural sample) the sale of agricultural land is criticised, because the economics behind agricultural land use does not incentivise purchase. According to Participant 32, 'donating' money to the city and having locals to plant and harvest specific products make ownership redundant, so that land can remain ' in the custody of local ancestors'. Were these reforms to be evaluated for further application outside of the NSSZ, and therefore in a situation where the public's eyes are not a push factor for companies, one wonders how much appeal they would have in places where farmland has almost no market value. At the same time, it is also evident why some companies do not feel they are returning something to society through the utilisation of farmland: they well know land is what they need, and only how it is used, with what intent, is what will shape their contribution.

Hence, as shown, the measures of the programme do not seem to suggest a substantial engagement by all private economic agents. Partially, this is due to the bias of the programme, which is designed to benefit new entrants rather than 'upgrade' the local fabric or improve existing players. This might be a problem when considering the wider application of the measures to other rural localities: on the one side, local administrations would need to compete to find companies with sufficient capital endowments, with the risk that the natural resources of these localities are further devalued or even gifted. Differently said, moral hazard situations might be created because the risks of entering agriculture are disproportionately transferred to the local administration.

[38] The total amount of land used in the programme is 46.6 hectares, of which 21 hectares were defined as abandoned (Cabinet Office 2020), that is, farmland that has not been cultivated for more than one year and where there is no indication that it will be cultivated in subsequent years (Su, Okahashi, and Chen 2018)

On the other hand, the conditions under which localities will need to attract companies or investors will be different. Yabu was a special circumstance: because the local government was under the direct observation of the national government, it endorsed a proactive stance, and the act of persuading and looking for potential companies to participate in the programme was relatively effective. Companies had expectations that they would derive some benefits from a national programme, regardless of their actual realisation. The promise of returns was sufficient to mobilise their interests, as, in theory, they did not know that after 2016 they could have established agricultural corporations elsewhere with the same ease.

That period has ended, and companies might prioritise considerations other than the opportunity to enter the sector itself. For hilly, mountainous areas, or other remote areas, this means that state intervention in agriculture might be highly ineffective. Local administrations might have to devise yet other sets of incentives, *if* thinking that investing in agriculture is the best solution to the problems they face. Hence, it is important to ask: what else might drive companies to invest in agriculture in the localities under study? The next section looks at this question.

## 5.3 Why non-economic factors matter for the revitalisation of the rural environment

Direct state intervention in Yabu provided an artificial advantage to the locality, but in its aspiration to be a model for hilly and mountainous areas, the way agriculture should favour revitalisation mostly would need to happen through the 'natural' state of the economy, that is to say, by relying on the strengths of the various localities. State-led efforts aim to create sufficiently strong market forces to make agriculture a self-sustaining sector, able to attract companies by virtue of its profit-generating capacity. Nonetheless, evidence from the sample shows that companies enter in the agricultural sector not only for economic reasons. The links between agriculture, territory, and people are of a heterogeneous nature, and they appear to shape the rural in different ways. In particular, three types of relationships were identified: the rural as an economic locus, the rural as a social locus, and the rural as any place. These relationships appear to have different outcomes on the socio-economy: whereas the former is linked to the waves and cycles of the economy, the latter two have provided a constant flow of people to the areas.

The perspective of the rural as an economic locus emerges as relevant for NSSZ corporate agricultural producers. The rural territory functions as a safe economic asset for agricultural production and experimentation, able to compensate for the decline of other primary activities and stabilise the management of the parent company in a period of population decline and uncertainty. Because the liberalisation of the agricultural sector is relatively recent, some companies (especially constructors) participated in the new wave of opportunities depopulation

is creating. The thinking behind these companies' logic is one of expansion, where Yabu is not only a model for other rural areas, but also a private business model for the company itself to be exported nationwide. Expressing the rational separation between social and economic life, Yabu can be seen as a productive site through which the parent company extends its arms to control new parts of the supply chain (P1) or where to exploit the new opportunities that smart agriculture with low or no labour allows for capital-intensive companies (P3), or as an experimental site, where companies rethink and enlarge the core services provided by the parent company nationwide (P4) or attempt new forms of integration between sectors (P14).

> [Yabu] is a region where it is difficult to continue agriculture […]. The agricultural land in the Kinki district[39], where [our company] operates, is 70% in what is generally called a mountainous area. If farming in such area cannot function as a business, then it begs to question whether our own business [as an agricultural machinery producer and distributor] will also function. Well, obviously, our own business will not function either, so we have to find a way to make farming sustainable ourselves (P4).

Companies look for a 'perspective … about how to utilise effectively rural areas as a company and to measure the revitalisation of the area and its economic effects' (P14), so that, rather than the locality itself being important, it is what it represents that matters, as a part of a greater picture.

Differently from NSSZ corporate producers, the rural is seen as a social locus by local, small-scale, family businesses. For these participants, agriculture constantly intersects with social life and the formation of human ties, in an economy which is extremely socialised. In both Yabu and Asago, local social patterns and personal motivations are important for the reproduction of the local environment. The locality is home before being anything else, and the relationship which emerges with more strength is caring about the family and the household (*ie*). As in other cases in the whole sample, a common reason to return to rural Japan, in the past as in the present, and start or continue a business originates from notions of filial duty and the continuation of the family, whereby 'the oldest son had to go back to the countryside and take over the (family) business' (P31). Agriculture is one of the means allowing social and economic needs to converge.

The household is more than a kinship relation in rural Japan, with important social and economic implications (Nakane 1967). In the case of agricultural production, those who stay in the locality, U-turners[40] and eldest sons can expect to inherit or be entrusted not only with the family fields, but also with the fields of ageing farmers without successors based on their social merits and social worth. What starts as a 'family' motivation can thus stretch to become a social orientation which can help achieving economic results. For instance, Participant 31 recollects how the 'volunteerism' which motivated him in caring for those who do not have the possibility to farm

[39] Another way to refer to the Kansai area.
[40] The term, coined by Kuroda in 1979 (Traphagan 2017), indicates rural citizens coming back to the locality after spending a period working in the city.

anymore helped enlarging the size of the farm, and so achieve economic outcomes, while the tradition of farmers' collectivism at the village level[41], where farmers' households join together to launch their versions of regional revitalisation, is the basis for Participant 5's business as a strawberry leisure farm:

> [We started with] village revitalisation…. There were 13 families who came together as a business in a village called Uchiyama. At that time, the father of my ex-partner was the representative director and started this. I was married and at home, so I was asked if I could help a little. […] Four of the thirteen families were divided into groups, making soba or making vegetables. Four of them were strawberry farmers. […The thinking was, if we do pack sales, it is possible to sell to outsiders, but the reason we do strawberry picking is because we want to get people to come here.

The existence of such collective, informal institutions to organise the management of land and economic life is dependent of the level of embeddedness of companies and entrepreneurs in the local fabric — an important point in which the local and non-local debate matters (but only when non-local means new entrant, or the unknown with whom transactions cannot be mediated by trust). This is what the 'rural society' has long been understood as: the continuation of localised agrarian relationships where there is convergence between social bonds and economic outcomes. Many of those who enter agriculture have already been surrounded by a social environment conducive to such forms of businesses. Corporate or new, non-local companies need state institutions to access similar resources, something which was picked up in the state's JRS and seen as a case where state intervention in agricultural production might be needed.

Moreover, family linkages can interact with the search for independence after years of being a 'salaryman'. Even when profit margins are low, agricultural entrepreneurs share what Whittaker calls the individualistic desire to be the 'lord of the castle'(1997, 6), found in many small companies in Japan in and outside the agricultural sector and, again, posited to be linked to the 'feudal idea of handing [your little business] on to their family' (Florence, cited in: Whittaker 1997, 3). The drive for autonomy and being responsible for your own future thus intersects with the availability of family land and agricultural machinery used as the basis for start-ups.

Finally, there were cases in which the relationship with the territory is pragmatic, a happenstance. Not all participants in short are particularly sensitive to location, or can identify clear reasons behind their being in certain places in specific capacities. These cases are especially found among non-family companies which have a long-standing presence in the locality but are either externally controlled and financed or have mixed ownership. The motivations provided to enter agriculture are a mix of social and economic aims which do not necessarily assign to the territory

[41] Both Yabu and Asago are mergers, where different village units or hamlets were amalgamated into administrative cities. Examples of different types of collective farming are provided in Iba and Sakamoto (2016), Rosenberg and Sugimoto (2022), Wood (2012) and Jentzsch (2017).

a particular meaning or function, rather having a practical essence. For instance, economic calculations have drawn a decade-old, non-local manufacturing subsidiary to enter the agricultural sector to rescue its local employees:

> We didn't start farming because we really wanted to. The thing is that business has slowed down […] Ours is artisan work. It is not something that you can do part time. […] So, I started thinking about how I could keep my employees and avoid losing jobs. During the garlic high-season, I'm there. When business comes in here, all the people that work out in the fields come here to help. When I am not busy with my first job, many people go out in the fields. They say it's like working on two crops a year (P2).

Agriculture does not connect territory and people here, it is an activity bringing profits and squaring budgets, unlinked to the past of the company or any form of local social customs. However, there is a strong social-oriented element. It is the attachment to workers and the sense of social duty that the (non-local) company developed through the years which drove the decision to enter agriculture, assisted by another major factor: enabling collaborations. Some companies closely collaborate among themselves and with the local administration, so that entering the sector is in a few cases a favour to other companies or, as seen, a sign of gratitude and commitment to the local administration. Rather than seeing agriculture and territory as particularly meaningful, a practical approach often leads such participants.

The territory can thus be seen as a productive or experimental site, as a space enabling social relationships to unfold, or as a happenstance. Participants in the agricultural sector interpret the territory differently through their agricultural operations, and, by emphasising purely economic reasons, the state is downplaying how many small agricultural businesses have continuously reproduced the rural socio-economy. Social relationships can be very strong motivators in terms of bringing back people to the local areas and seem, to some extent, stronger than economic motivations because they are based on human needs and on life priorities which so far have not stopped working. There is, differently said, a degree of continuity deriving from the more permanent nature of human bonds, which might continue to serve as a long-term 'renewable' source of resilience for rural localities. Economic motivations depend on the external context and the conditions of the market and might be sufficient for waves of company and capital formation, giving an immediate boost to these localities' socio-economies. They might need to be nurtured to keep reconstituting.

This does not make either economic or socio-economic motivations intrinsically better: it only means that the state could decide to leverage on different aspects or groups of people to support revitalisation, rather than being fixated on commodifying rural resources for economic exploitation.

## 5.4 Can places like Yabu and Asago become centres for agricultural production?

Yabu has been chosen as a site for agricultural reform with the proposition that it is possible to overcome the long-standing problems of agricultural production in Japanese hilly and mountainous areas. Corporate agricultural producers, who can choose their location, tend to emphasise the positive aspects of Yabu. For non-corporate companies, location represents less of a choice than a matter of fact to cope with. They adapt to the locality, as a site of production and consumption, so their interpretations of what the locality is and offers are more nuanced. Whether places like Yabu and Asago can become agricultural centres depends not so much on agriculture as a general sector, but on the details of agricultural production.

Rather than localities having specific or absolute advantages, the gains derived from the locality largely depend on the nature of the agricultural product and on the capacities that companies have to invest, their capital endowments. Just as it was remarked by the Marxist literature, agricultural production possesses certain peculiarities compared to industry which give locations specific advantages: 'If the product and place do not match, then in the end, there will be no money in it' (P6). Clearly, one relative advantage all participants recognise is that land is both abundant and cheap in remote rural areas. Some enablers to agricultural production are more specific, relating to the particular ecological system and product requirements. With the exception of industrial agriculture carried out in controlled environments, where capital is the big discriminant, the positive assessment of the locality depends on the unique climatic conditions of the area (P3 and P6). Things such as the perishability of the product are not details but can change the perception of the locality. Rice as a dry, traditional crop can be easily stored and exported, and hence an organic rice producer could not see any downsides in operating in Asago (P31), but producers of high-value, perishable products, such as vegetables or fruits, refuse the idea that agricultural production is convenient in hilly and mountainous areas (P36). In order to enlarge operations, substantial capital investments would be needed in greenhouses and so forth. Without human intervention, the natural local environment is rather hostile for some, and friendly for others. It is up to companies' ingenuity (and capital availability) to find how to value the qualities of the locality or overcome its limits, and the choice of crop is a key to that.

Moreover, different 'business expectations' change the perception or evaluation of places. The locality can be considered not only as a place of production, but also a place of consumption. This is the perspective upheld by smaller companies, who do not have exclusive sales channels. In such cases, participants are interpreters not only of local dynamics but also of the interchanges between high consumption (urban) centres and productive (rural) centres. Producers struggle

with the local market. Distance from urban centres can mean being excluded from occasional customers (P5), but also that agricultural producers need to develop management and marketing skills to form sales channels and escape the small market trap (P36). The quality of the local market transpires as important, too. The ability of small producers to grow is severely hampered by the need to find affluent markets, with customer segments able to shoulder the difference in price, open to discern the quality of products, and with the power to dictate food fashions (P10 and 36). As Participant 10 remarked, 'Trendy things come from urban areas to rural areas', and the dynamics of urban consumption are the magic sphere through which 'to read the future' on how new, foreign crops can be introduced in the production and consumption of the countryside. Affluent markets are disproportionately based in the Kanto region[42], where higher starting prices are accepted by buyers[43]. New preferences hence force small operators to bypass the natural advantages of the locality in an attempt to answer demand. That is why some participants believe that rather than agriculture being convenient in the area, access to land and the quality of soil are major reasons to locate businesses in hilly and mountainous rural areas.

Obviously, only by treating agriculture as a homogeneous undertaking can the state assume that rural areas, just by virtue of having available farmland, can become centres for agricultural production. In reality, agriculture presents too much complexity for its feasibility and success to be calculated only on the availability of one factor. The morphology, topology and the ecology of places put limits to what can be produced and under which conditions. Hilly and mountainous areas, with their diverse territories, are still disadvantaged in agricultural production. Even after the consolidation of land, agricultural producers need to cope with crop selection, the adversity of weather conditions and the difficult morphology of the terrain. Agriculture under controlled and artificial environments needs not to take place in rural areas. Moreover, production does not seem the biggest problem, distribution is. Non-corporate producers might be able to increase production, but they struggle to increase sales. Nonetheless, as the state is re-regulating the supply side of the economy, little attention is given to problems affecting agriculture from other angles. There is, for the state, mainly a problem of production.

[42] Where Tokyo is.

[43] Despite the fact that Japanese consumers, and especially women and women's consumer organisations, are willing to accept higher prices in exchange for food safety (Vogel 1999; Ishida and Ishida 2021; Kimura 2011; Statista 2021), high-value agriculture led by the search for the affluents produces what Friedmann has depicted as being the class dynamics of food consumption [see LR]. When fairer retribution for producers is captured through increases in unit prices, the repercussions on the wider society are too important for discussing the preferability of types of businesses only on normative grounds, as rural scholars have occasionally done.

## 5.5 How companies relate to the changing demography: opposing solutions to demographic decline

The human factor of localities rarely emerges in the conversations with agricultural producers. Nonetheless, depopulation, ageing, and outmigration are common phenomena in Japan and especially rural areas, and neither Yabu nor Asago are exempt from these trends. All companies, without exceptions, are deeply aware of the demographic changes ongoing in Japan and in the localities in which they operate. If resilience is the act of using the economy to achieve a particular social aim, to re-establish a healthier balance between geography and humans, how companies in the agricultural sector translate these demographic social configurations into their economic realities helps understanding whether, when, and how they are pushed to act upon them. Again, differences emerge in how the corporate and non-corporate sector understand demographic changes, and, in turn, these change the way in which companies act upon the rural and shape its future.

A first problem discussed is the way demographic changes are transforming the market for agricultural inputs. Corporate agricultural producers rarely comment on decreasing markets when what is sold is agricultural produce, because their markets are mostly outside the local area and because 'agriculture is the job of making food, so it will not get to zero' (P4). Nonetheless, the interest of some corporations in rural areas goes beyond the production of food per se and concerns the sale of agricultural inputs to farmers. As seen in the literature review, forms of production can coexist as corporate agriculture does not have interest in erasing other forms of farms, rather aiming at making them dependent. Hence, for some corporate companies, the continuation of the family farm is 'a matter of life or death' (P4), driving companies to experiment technological and technical innovations to *allow* the continuation of various forms of farming. Larger agricultural companies do not wish the family farm to disappear as a market, and unsurprisingly express sympathies for state subsidies targeting this group.

Secondly, whereas on the one side depopulation and ageing allow companies to seize the economic opportunity accruing from land mobilisation, on the other companies frame demographic changes as an important matter because of the way they are expected to affect the internal dynamics of production. The difference on this matter between corporate and non-corporate producers is substantial. For the corporate producer, the major problem emerging with depopulation, ageing and outmigration is that they all lead to a decrease in the availability of agricultural employees. An almost unanimous reaction found is then the intention to decrease the number of agricultural workers needed, substantiated by plans to either introduce or deepen automation in agricultural production. Corporate companies' first instinct to cope with

demographic changes is to substitute labour for capital (P1, 3, 4, 14). Although companies are still assessing the financial feasibility of their businesses before further investments in automation, they are introducing and studying processes of deskilling and labour-saving technologies in labour-intensive phases of agricultural production, such as seedling. Corporate companies invest heavily in capital. They are also better positioned to receive sizable state subsidies, as the latter are currently biased towards the purchase of equipment or efficiency-related improvements, explaining why such companies mostly agree that 'subsidies for farmers are quite generous' (P1). Although corporate companies employ more, such drive towards intense automation is a warning bell. By itself, the removal of processes of production which are cumbersome is not necessarily bad, and neither is automation when it means that workers are introduced to new emerging professions. The problem here is that agriculture, and specifically this type of production, is being promoted to help revitalise a declining area by bringing in new people or employing locals. As the labour side is gradually being removed and only the capital side of production is strengthened, it is unclear what should be gained by the local population in the long term. Productivity might increase, but how the locality benefits is largely unclear.

The reaction from non-corporate producers is rather the opposite. Although pressures from the labour market are indeed as important as for the corporate sector, non-corporate agricultural producers show no intentions to utilise technologies to solve the issue. Technology and capital investments are complementary to human work, involving for instance warehouses and storage to control the distribution of sales and personnel's tasks during the year (P2) or focusing on soft skills and cultivation techniques. Cooperation and collaborations help the sharing of agricultural machinery (P18) or the development of products (P10). Scale obviously matters for the adoption of new technologies, and there is no evidence in the interviews suggesting that non-corporate companies are ideologically against it, but the first predisposition of participants does not follow that line of thought. Not only raising salaries emerges as a (scary) future option (P36), but the need highlighted by several participants is to train more human resources so that, after land is consolidated, competences can be handed on, and agriculture can continue despite the overall decrease in the farming population (P31 and 36). For some non-corporate producers, the solution to the problem is to invest more in people, rather than less, and keep on cultivating with the purpose of preserving agricultural activities.

The attitude towards technology and automation is also very diverse among companies. Some producers perceive the substitution of labour for capital as desirable rather than just possible, both from their own productive perspective and from the perspective of the locality. This is best embodied in the excerpts below from two NSSZ companies, which are almost diverging extremes

revealing how technology shapes the ideal of rural of the future and what it means to preserve the locality:

> Right now, we need people to operate machines. In the future, it may be possible to operate machines without [them] … thanks to artificial intelligence. […] To that end, …it is sufficient with two employees. [Moreover] currently farming can be done only in the daytime, once it gets dark you cannot do it. That is because people are needed to operate machines. But the next step is unmanned automation, and if that can be done, we can turn agriculture into a 24 hour a day industry. If machines can be operated at night, the factories can also run at night. This will lead to protecting this region. [If we do nothing], these areas may become abandoned, but we can tie our business to protecting this region (P3).

> Of course, machines are installed, but we do this almost all by hand. […] I have been to Europe, around the Netherlands. They don't consider flower making to be agriculture. Flower production is all industrialized. It's really wonderful. […] they harvest here, put the harvested things on the belt conveyor, and the things … go through the basement to the collection place, where there is a girl who receives them and puts them in a bag. After that, they put water, and box it for shipment […]. If you pay money, anything is possible, but it does not lead to making money. […] I want to do everything I can do with human power. In Japanese agriculture, we had summer cultivation in open-fields, and they used to manage about 300 Tsubos per person [ca. 0.1 hectare]. […] after that, when the production area increases, then good things become obscured […]. In fact, you don't need any machines […]. We need to do something about the abandoned farming land or else it will become a wasteland […]. After all, I am only thinking about stopping the flow of people and people not leaving (P6).

While sharing the same aim of preventing the abandonment of land, technology mediates the relation between people and land as opposite poles: in the first case, the use of and faith in technological advancement functions as one of the bases for erecting the new role of corporate companies in rural Japan, the preservation of land and the productive capacity of the countryside: people might leave, but the resources will be protected because technology will allow to do so. Maintaining the functions of the natural resources held in the countryside puts the relationship between society and land in the shade, and the final beneficiary is Japan as a whole.

In the second case, the awe towards the industrialisation of agriculture is quickly side-lined on the grounds that agriculture should be a means for people to live and return to the countryside. It is not so much that food or products matter themselves, and it is not about the potential of technology: what matters is that some types of agriculture are alternatives to leaving offered by the context, from a very local perspective. The interests at stake are hence distributed on different scales, and both scenarios depicted (and what stands in between) should be considered when thinking about what building resilience is about: there are qualitative choices to be made as to what is the goal of rural revitalisation, or which people should benefit the most from such attempts to revolutionise agriculture.

## 5.6 How agricultural companies shape the rural

The most obvious and direct way in which companies can generate resilience in the locality is through employment, that is, through the direct relationship joining companies as employers, people as employees, and localities as workplaces. Employment might function as one of the core mechanisms to alleviate the negative sides of demographic changes and as a sphere in which companies' agency can be exerted at its fullest. However, the debate on agricultural employment

is not that simple. An established employer-employee-workplace relation only exists in rather large operations, that is, in corporate agriculture or in cases where agriculture is not the original activity of the operations in the locality (such as P2 and P18). This would mean that smaller producers are denied the possibility to influence rural resilience. Clearly, both corporate and non-corporate producers might help the reproduction of the rural ecosystem, but they do so in diverging ways: corporate agricultural producers tend to emphasise the benefits of establishing formal employment relationships and make of agriculture a career like any other, while non-corporate producers tend to emphasise the benefits that sharing, collaborating and passing knowledge to others have on the reconstitution of the rural ecosystem.

### 5.6.1 Introducing new management and employment practices in agriculture

Despite the fact that corporate agricultural producers contemplate the reduction of the workforce in the future due to demographic changes, creating jobs is cited as one of the major perceived responsibilities that these companies have towards the local fabric. In particular, participants hoped to create a more inclusive agriculture, constituting a desirable occupation for young people (P1, 4, 14). This is deemed possible only through the transformation of the management style towards a fully corporate form, where employer and employee are linked by an economic contract.

In general, corporate agricultural producers struggle to gain the sympathy of the Japanese public. According to participants, corporate agriculture is not well-regarded in Japan because of fears that corporate bankruptcy might imply disengagement from the land (P3), and because forms of production which are mechanised or automatised are simply 'not considered farming' (P18). Their work and way of working is not recognised by the farming population, and tensions arise when different mentalities encounter. For example, in the Japanese countryside, farmer-owners collectively organised the care and cleansing of minor roads, rice fields and irrigation systems for free, a work done mostly manually because of the fragmentation of land. Newly established agricultural companies also need to participate in the field maintenance system, and this is a source of contention with farmers. When companies operate in agriculture, they come in close contact with farmers who have tended their micro-lands for generations and are inserted in their cosmos. Companies, especially non-local ones, have problems interacting with their neighbours. This is because, on the one hand, the arrival of new entrants signifies that resources which were previously shared only among farmers have to be shared more widely. This requires that companies 'go inside the region' and face the 'many elderly people in the countryside [who], as is often the case in rural areas, refuse those coming in from the outside' (P14). On the other hand, contrasting logics about farming and the incompatibility of ways of organising work have

repercussions on companies' operations, and participants feel demoralised and unable to make a case for their presence in the territory:

> The areas where rice paddies are mainly being cultivated now are rice paddies that underwent field maintenance[44]. […] If such maintenance can be properly carried out, it will be possible to use unmanned machines and other such equipment and save labour. I tell [farmers] that they should also do field maintenance [… and] that we can't do farming unless they do what we ask them to, but some people are against it. […] It would be good if people thought about the future, but somehow, they say 'this is my rice field, I'll have it as I like', that sort of things. That's the way of thinking in the countryside, they have always done things a certain way, that's what some say. It's quicker to go talk to the mayor of Yabu and tell him to solve the matter quickly. […] So, the ones who disagree, those are the people that don't make it themselves, and we make it for them. I don't quite understand it, because it's not something that costs a lot of money […]. But because they don't do the field maintenance, our company will always try to cultivate rice in a small field, and it is not tenable as we are in the red. But if we say 'if you don't do the maintenance, we won't farm it', then what will happen is that the small rice fields […] will become dilapidated (P18).

The diffidence towards 'strangers' is in reality a stance against companies who operate according to different principles. Contrasts between types of production lead companies to endow the local administration with the key role of mediating their interactions with farmers. Even when companies cooperate with farmers, or even when they take the extra steps to pay for the improvement of others' fields (a positive externality for farmers), local farmers do not necessarily see this as a way of giving back to society, but as a duty to land. Indeed, they have been performing these tasks for years and companies' dissatisfaction with the state of things might be received as arrogance rather than future vision. So, as Participant 14 said, 'this is a job that you can't do without having the local people acknowledge it and accept the work. These are quite difficult points, especially for companies'. Corporate companies are on the defensive as front-runners in the introduction of corporate forms of farming in remote areas which have long-standing traditions of independent small farming (P18).

One of the ways to legitimise their presence in rural areas is to promote their role in the creation of a new agriculture capable of attracting and retaining young people by making the sector profitable:

> I think [farming] needs to be as close to corporate management as possible. We need to make profits, and the number of people who will do [agriculture] will increase. […]. So, whether it be in this kind of rural area or in Tokyo, I want to be able to do such a [business] in the same way. We can't make excuses just because no one comes in rural areas. […] Raising the level of rural areas … is the same as the problem of people, the problem of money. You have to raise it little by little… […] Right now, there aren't many local companies…, so that's why young people go out […]. I don't think there are many people who don't like their hometown from the bottom of their hearts. If you can [provide employment], if you can build a foundation where the family can live properly until the last generation without leaving, it is definitely not over. I want to aim at it (Participant 14).

Nonetheless, corporate companies are still learning to adjust to the rhythms of agriculture (see table 20 for full excerpts), including difficulties with the time of production and workflows (P1 and P2), the need to be competitive (P3), or the lack of flexibility in drawing working times (P4).

[44] Field maintenance refers to the reorganisation of small paddy fields and irregularly shaped fields into larger rectangles, as well as the construction of new drainage and road systems (*Midori Netto* n.d.). When it is implemented, farmers still have access to the same quantity of field, but the exact location might change.

Working under a stable contract with holidays is the way to farm of future Japan, but to realise such goals, companies need to be profitable. At the time of the interviews, the majority of these companies were operating in the red. Considering business times, this by no means implies anything other than agriculture, however heavily capitalised, is not a business for which 'you can make plans on a desk' (P31).

*Table 21: Corporate Management in Agriculture: Excerpts*

| # | PARTICIPANT'S REFLECTIONS |
|---|---|
| **1** | Summer vegetables are inevitably limited to corporate activities only in the summer (June to November), and the period of sales is about six months from June to November too. *After all, as a private farmer, it would be good enough if you can earn for about six months. But at the end of the day, if you have to maintain a corporation with just a half-year of corporate activity, there is a limitation*. And, in terms of employment of people, if you can only employ them for half a year, there is not much local economic effect. So, *we had no choice but to build a facility that would allow farming throughout the year*, and we built this green house. We can cultivate [vegetables] throughout the year. |
| **2** | I am often asked this, so let's put it in terms of business segments, for instance: are we profiting from bookbinding? Are we profiting from agriculture? Isn't it a weird question? In the beginning, since our business model wasn't sustainable, our aim was to do something that could be complementary with and be complemented by our first activity. However, we were often told: is bookbinding profitable? Is<br>agriculture profitable? You see, agriculture alone is not profitable. You need to have this [bookbinding?]<br>and do business as if they were together, this is our aim now. |
| **3** | I do not know exactly about what will occur in the future. But I think there are two choices, that is, there is farmer's farming (family farms), and something that we are trying to do, a large-scale corporate farm. I do not know what kind of agriculture will be done by family-run farms in the future, but what we as corporations, I think it is possible to pass on and to sustain the corporate farming. […] I think that farming should be done by corporations. […]<br><br>There is no bankruptcy in the family-run farms, there is no real end, because they do their best. If a corporation engages in farming, there is a possibility of bankruptcy. Even if they were trying to protect the farmland, there is a possibility that the corporations will go under […]. But such debate does not move anything forward. […] We should have a competition for who can reduce the costs, such things should be in agriculture. So, I think that family-run farms can be left alone by themselves, but I do not see a real future in it. […] It cannot be helped if the corporation goes bankrupt. Of course, there will be those corporations who will do their best to sustain the business too. So, I think that rather than have uncertainty with family-run farms, it is better to do it in a corporate-run farms. |
| **4** | Managing this business is very difficult […]. The difficult content is that the labour costs is high and that we cannot take any holidays, right? If it is a [regular] company, it will be only natural to do so, but even if I want to take a break, I cannot take a break. Well, there are other things that I've found out about. Maybe in a few years, there will be more people, and it may be possible to take turns in order to rest, but even then, compared to ordinary salaried workers, it may be more difficult to take holidays. […] When a company enters the agricultural sector, that kind of thing becomes an issue. Furthermore, if a farmer, for example, were to operate the house, they don't have the same sense of time. There is no sense of hourly wages, so what you sell on the next day will be your own income as well. If that is the case, you might need to prepare bags all night and do various preparations... Well, what you sell is your income, and you don't have the labour cost or feeling like that, so it's not a problem for the farmers to do. Well, I found it very difficult to do that as a company. |

Aspirations to attract a young workforce were also falling short. Participants substantially agree on their inability to recruit young workers, because 'there are no young people' and, if there are, they are uninterested in the type of job — i.e., companies are not able to persuade the population of the value of working as an agricultural employee. Plans to grow such new workforce, including recruitment by the headquarters or young workers schemes, had yet to materialise. Because

companies benefitted both from the presence of agricultural high schools (P1) and from the 'rural effect' of low employment opportunities to recruit young employees and because elderly workers are still abundant and easily recruitable, companies 'have not been troubled with employment' (P4). Agriculture is less gender- and age-biased than other export industries, and the nature of the tasks involved is simple but extensive, rather than intensive and specialised, so that essentially everyone can farm. These companies have little incentive for the moment to improve the working conditions or to spend concrete efforts to attract the youth. They might want to, but they are not. Despite believing that their responsibility is to provide employment, they scantily differentiate or can articulate precise measures on how they are improving working conditions. While it is correct to emphasise that larger companies employ more, and that for some companies agriculture has allowed the preservation of the non-agricultural workforce (P2), the opportunities provided so far in the corporate agricultural sector are enjoyed mostly by the elders and by flexible workers already in the area.

The expectations placed upon these participants, especially in terms of job creation or revitalisation, might also be unbalanced. As Participant 4 reported, local people often exaggerate the actual responsibility of newcomers to the municipality, shifting the burden of development to those who have more power and capital.

> Before setting up the company here, we had a meeting with the local people. During that meeting, the reaction of the farmers was, if Company 4a comes here, what are they going to do for us – that kind of reaction. In other words, the local people here had the stance that we will be the one to revitalise farming. But that is not good enough, we will do our best and you must do our best, that is my position. […] It will be useless if it is not half and half. By going to farm here, as a corporation, we have half of the responsibility. Not 100%, it's 50% that we are responsible for.

Although trying to do their best, participants simply did not feel they could match the expectations and demands advanced to them.

### 5.6.2 Readaptation and companies as enablers: weak or strong links?

The formal employer-employee-workplace relation is replaced by (extended) family labour, occasional workers, and trainees in non-corporate companies depending on the actual type of agricultural company. As for many small companies, in and outside the agricultural sector, these are very ambiguous cases in terms of being entrepreneurs or workers, what has been defined as petty commodity producers in Marxism or can be generically referred to as a form of self-employment with full ownership of the factors of production. Hence, there emerge not only different conceptions of labour but also different perceived contributions to the local population, as direct influences on the locality are linked to maintaining or improving people's own life standards and lifestyle or functioning as enablers for the rest of producers or producers-to-be through forms of cooperation.

When discussing issues of labour, work or employment, the dynamics of small production that seem so unappealing to corporate companies, such as the inefficiency or overworking of farmers, become either organisational strengths or reasonable work-life bargains from the perspective of non-corporate companies, however varied these are. Hence, commenting on whether working with the (expanded) family is the best solution business-wise, Participant 5 did not hesitate to answer:

> Yes, because the labour cost is the largest. […] When I hire someone from the outside, they start insisting on their rights, and I get some complaints about what this job is about. […] if it is in the family, they understand that the family's job is this important strawberry, and that feeling is there in the job, and each task is that much more careful. But the outsiders, they just come here for one or two hours and inevitably just do as told. So, the quality of the work is bad, but they still want the money. […] When it comes down to it, doing this with family is much more efficient and the quality is better. [Outsiders] are … untrustworthy.

The priority of commitment to the enterprise and its vision can be so strong that the distinction between 'employee' and 'non-employee' is applied even to family members to describe an attitude to work, so that a son who 'completely hates' the strawberry garden is described in negative light as being 'completely an employee. And that is something burdensome' (P5). Not having holidays or not knowing when your salary will come, too, seem reasonable bargains when compared to the feeling of being under someone's control or if it means having a good work-life balance and your routine.

> The fact that stable income has disappeared is [an] extremely large [change compared to being a salaryman]. Rather than getting paid every month, … the money comes in a month or two months later. […]. And, there are no more holidays, ... it feels like I am working all year round. […] But I think this job would be good if you can get money. When I was a salaried worker, my boss demanded a lot, you have to manage subordinates, it is … a difficult job with [pressure from] above and below. But you can do anything as you like in farming (P36).

Such qualities of work, independence and the sense of managing your life, are a consistent source of attractiveness to the industry. Although participants might express the limits of small companies in giving back to the localities in terms of employment, recognising their scarce opportunity to employ or offer rewarding salaries (P36), one of the main ways in which non-corporate companies add to the local socio-economy in terms of bringing new flows of people is by training new entrants from urban areas (P10, 31, 36)[45], the so-called I-turners who are often interested in the 'rural' lifestyle and in agriculture, despite incurring a loss of income after relocation (Obikwelu, Ikegami, and Tsuruta 2017), or by committing their time to allow others to become independent agricultural producers, rather than agricultural employees.

> I want to be able to say that you can settle here and farm … . I want to teach that even if you don't want to be a rice farmer, maybe flower-making can be enjoyable and fun. […] there is a solid market [for flowers] [...] so you can get a little more people to settle in Yabu. Together with dad and mom, maybe farming can be a potential [future]. […] I want to be able to use my time to promote the work to other farmers. And I want to create a situation where I can give advice. There is one young person in particular who has relied on me [...] I've known

[45] Numerous governmental schemes are available for the young to support entry in agriculture through traineeships. This is also another form by which localities are supported by the state, although their roll-out is dependent on the local administration. Apparently, the administration in Asago city has been particularly active in promoting such schemes.

> the father for a long time. I have been recommending sunflowers. […]. If it works, it might lead to a business (P6).

As raised in the quotation above, non-corporate companies can function as enablers for other people to initiate or continue their businesses. This is especially the case for companies that are producers and distributors, such as Participant 10, whose business model, while premised on 'working with the local people' for those who do not have transactions with JA, allows the company to cope with sales expansion without further investment in productive capacity. This way to achieve size by borrowing other people's specialties particularly suits the workings of the small economies and aids local producers with their major obstacle: selling at decent prices. Traditionally, JA used to help local producers to sell products. However, because neither Yabu nor Asago are major production areas, the local JAs lack influence in the prefecture and are seen as offering poor and unacceptable contractual conditions (P36), expensive to use (P5) or a secondary buyer to keep for good relations (P31 and 2).

Enabling companies commit to the idea of working as networks, 'to develop agriculture …collectively borrowing the power of people…[so that] the power dispersed by each person, if gathered, will become strong' (P31). Non-corporate companies, then, distribute little to many. While it is clear that little scope of action is available to such producers in terms of directly offering employment or altering the nature of work, a very important limitation in the context of a changing demography, what non-corporate companies enable is the continuation of the many, established, small agricultural businesses, as well as the reproduction of this form of agricultural enterprise through the training of the new generation of farmers. Just as corporate producers, they cannot change the desirability of entering the agricultural sector. However, their activism and participation in promoting agriculture and its goodness are a steady form of support in the localities.

### 5.6.3 Other ways in which companies shape the rural

Although it is not possible to see all the ways in which companies are shaping rural resilience, this final section looks at two areas in which companies, by rearranging the factors of production and through their management practices, can influence rural resilience.

***<u>The preservation of land: production rather than conservation</u>***

Undoubtedly, land, the basis for most agricultural operations[46], holds unique relevance as a topic for agricultural companies. In the JRS, new players in agriculture should help with the

[46] But not all. One of the companies interviewed reutilised an old school building to start a hydroponic cultivation. In-door cultivation is rapidly spreading in Japan (*Financial Times* 2020), and the advantage of rural areas in terms of availability of cheap land could be altered by this emerging form of production, which can be located closer to high-consumption centres.

preservation of rural resources through which, supposedly, the renewal of the 'rural' society would be fuelled. However, the relationship between land, companies, and depopulation is clearly not a direct one, and it is hard to establish any link between land use and resilience.

Some companies self-define their 'contribution' to the locality in terms of preservation of land, even arriving to state that such preservation efforts are among the drivers motivating entry in agriculture (P3). Generally, utilising land is seen as a way to pay back the local society by stopping the abandonment of fields (P1,3,4,6,14,18). Few participants articulate how such contribution works beyond reminding the increasing abandonment of land, doing so, for example, by emphasising the concrete number of employees hired to cultivate the land in question, and hence giving priority to the connection of land use to population:

> [Our president] … thought that … establishing an agricultural corporation will protect the fields. […] In a sense, if nobody else has borrowed, we are using what could have been all abandoned land. So, we are activating one plot of land […]. The employment of this [land] is a little more than 10 people. By being actively involved here, we are borrowing land and we are offering a place to work. […] we want to return a certain kind of gratitude to the local community, one year at a time, and I think we have done that (P1).

Nonetheless, participants tend to emphasise the general role of land preservation, thinking they can help rural economies increase their role in the national panorama by protecting the country's landscape (P18) or by increasing food safety in consideration of the territorial morphology of Japan. The perspective adopted by corporate participants is not tied to the destiny of the locality but to the destiny of the Japanese population. Rural areas, and rural land, serve wider aims.

> Presently, the agricultural area of Japan is 40% in the mountainous area. The other 60% are huge farmlands in Hokkaido, Tohoku, or Kyushu areas[47]. As a country we cannot abandon the mountainous lands […]. The country is investing a lot of machines here in a tiny place to find a way to sustain agriculture in the mountainous areas. One of the main objectives is to protect the environment. […] It means that we are working to protect not just the natural environment, but the food of Japan. Certainly, an easier way to farm would be to do so in a place where one can scale up and be more efficient (P3).

Despite the mention by Participant 3, only for Participant 31, an organic rice producer, was the preservation of land explicitly linked to safeguarding the natural ecosystem and the use of eco-friendly practices. As a pioneer in the introduction of the so-called Stork-Raising Farming method (*JA* 2018) which allowed Asago to become a top destination for the Hometown Tax[48], passing down the environmental heritage of the area and the philosophy of living in symbiosis with nature for Participant 31 is not a matter of 'self-satisfaction, but [of] being satisfied':

> We prepared a nature-filled environment that would live in the rice fields and would feed the storks, such as frogs, newts. It is a farming method … [allowing] the stork to feed freely in the natural world. I want to cherish that kind of harmony with nature. […] there is also a desire to leave such safe nature to the next generation and children (P31).

[47] Hokkaido and Tohoku are situated in the North of Japan, Kyushu in the subtropical South.

[48] Furusato Nōzei, a tax system established in 2008 to help the revitalisation of regional economies. Taxpayers can pay their income or residential tax to a regional area, rather than the area in which they actually reside (*Japan Living Guide* 2021)

The term 'preservation of land' is not meant by most companies to indicate conservation efforts, and thus an intergenerational transfer of socio-economic benefits, but rather the safeguarding of the productive capacity of land.

One can also look outside agriculture to understand the difficulties in connecting revitalisation to land. The few instances in which land is connected to society and revitalisation involve the reutilisation of converted public buildings (P37 and 32). But participants do not emphasise such reutilisation as a remarkable achievement: 'from my point of view, if we didn't buy the school, it would have been cheaper. Build somewhere else with better transportation. However, our top executive said that we have to do it here. It was just the business model' (P32). According to the participants, the conditions for using restored buildings are not particularly advantageous for companies: there are no discounts, and rents are relatively high as large public buildings can be used only by one company instead of being shared by multiple tenants (P37).

Paradoxically, if not connected to revitalisation, land is the convenience of the rural: 'in the area at the back of the building, there are 6,000 square meters of land on which to build a factory. You can buy it for about 2.7 million yen [£16.000 ca.]. It's as cheap as Vietnam. […]. Also, property taxes are very low. […]. In Kobe, it's 1 square meter' (P34). However, when connected to efforts to revitalise local areas, the protection of land becomes an ambiguous discourse, an excuse for not attempting productive uses or benefitting from others' work. Participants in commercial streets failed to make meaningful spatial observations about their role in preserving the vitality of the cities by keeping their shops open. Moreover, while the social value of agricultural land is high, its low economic value becomes a way to treat land as worthless.

> In order to protect the land, we reluctantly made rice with [some landowners], but more than half of the rice was taken by them, and on top of that they were also paid for managing the field. Then, there was no productivity. […]…They say they were paid to protect their land, every year. But if you do something with such low productivity, you will not be able to revitalise. […] That's why I rent this place from Yabu City for around … 100,000 yen per year. 1 million for 10 years. […] Land is cheap. That's why the government does what it does. […] For us companies, that 50,000 or 100,000 is nothing, right? That's what they tell us. You ask yourself, what is this? Let me tell you, the so-called roots here are rotten, and so there is no development. Thinking the way as above. After all, if someone perseveres that all parties should be profiting by it, or rather I should say if you cannot turn in the plus, conforming by that endurance is not good for business and sales (P32).

The information sent by the market and that sent by the state on the value of land are largely incompatible, and participants, as businessmen, recognise the fragile basis on which revitalisation is attempted.

***<u>Profits as the means towards resilience</u>***

Another important aspect emerging in how companies shape rural resilience is the role of profits. Achieving profitability is arguably seen as the top individual responsibility companies must fulfil

in order to contribute to the locality. Rather than focusing on the process of how profits are made, or the possibility to satisfy part of people's needs and desires within the company environment, the greater emphasis is on the outcomes, or the potential of part of the revenues to be distributed through the political economy system.

Underlying such logic is the fact that proving that businesses can be viable in rural areas seems by itself an achievement, as underscored by the recurring theme of self-help discussed almost unanimously among agricultural producers, corporate and non-corporate alike. A rather curious and maybe contradictory empirical finding is then not only the way agricultural companies assert their autonomy and clearly demark their responsibilities towards the locality but how they do so by heavily framing the role of financial support, which is associated with the state, even after reporting that they are being 'subsidised' (i.e., receive occasional financial support) or would like to be when possible. Many of the dialogues with participants reported below imply the existence of 'others' who receive and almost live by the mercy of funds granted by the state.

There are nuances in how self-help is tackled. Self-help appears to be the result of a disconnection between the state and the needs of small producers, where the former fails to recognise the continuous commitment of existing local companies to their socio-economies and rather generously supports new entrants in agriculture. Hence, small producers might see themselves as insignificant in the eyes of the administration because of their inability to bring the 'new' into their societies, and through self-help they carve their spaces as essentially being neutral: not taking too much, not giving too much, but surviving:

> It seems that only when the so-called top dogs, …the really big companies from the outside, come here that it's good [for revitalisation], so the local ones that are in farming like us… don't really matter. […] When you're a new farmer, it looks like something new is coming in, and doing something new looks like the region is rising. […] from the perspective of the people at Yabu, or the municipal government, I think they would just rather spend money on things that will increase the population. […] I would like to receive whatever [money] that I can, but… because I'm doing a business…, I have a feeling that I have to make money with my own power. […] there are companies in Yabu which are very good at getting subsidies. But I don't really like that kind of things (P5).

> I don't know what a company can do in such a particular situation [for revitalization]. I wonder if I can do only small things that can be done occasionally. I'm sorry, it's like this (P36).

Even though participants were keen to accept new trainees and think this is a way to contribute to the local socio-economy, too much generosity in terms of state subsidies is posited to distort the perception of risks in new agricultural enterprises, so that the temper of the new farmers, their sense of individual responsibility, might not be forged. Hence, subsidies are seen as a sign of weakness, a lack of character, something to be carefully administered:

> Now, the biggest problem for farmers is sales. For the trainees, I worry about that because, surprisingly, anyone can produce, but Japanese people are bad at selling. […] Now trainees come in with this kind of policy, as pupil and mentors and they become acquainted with other farmers and learn how to establish a channel […] I wonder if there is anything else to ask the city for now. In reality, the trainees receive all kinds of money, and they have no sense of danger. I was working desperately because there was nothing at my time, but now the trainees are

> getting a little money, so they will live for three years […] No, I think that kind of thinking is basically for people who are weak-minded. […] If you can't survive with that, I think it's probably because they are not cut out to do it in the first place (P36).

Corporate companies largely share the same views, although lacking the feeling of neglect from the state institutions. Self-help is portrayed as a duty and again a pillar of participants' beliefs system, and the subtle association between subsidy and dependency, in the form of a supposed permanency of the subsidies, is seen as an impediment for the agricultural sector to be transformed into a growth industry:

> This is just my opinion, but when you receive subsidies for farming, subsidies are not permanent items. So, when they suddenly disappear, personally, I am sceptical whether that company… will survive. […] Having said that, that house costed 1 Oku-yen, so in order to reduce the initial investment a little, there was a program to obtain 1/3 of the total cost, so I asked… to use that. But basically, I prefer not to use subsidies, that is not my will. Not me. […] I cannot just rely on the government too much. I feel that I have to make a business model. I will ask the government for things that only the government can do. […] The most important thing is to try to manage on your own, but the other thing is that it is necessary to work together with the region (P4).

> If everyone got money from the country to farm, then there will be no development. Everyone should struggle, think about various things, whether it is realistic to do farming. This may be a little backwards, but I do not think that one should receive all of the subsidies (P3).

Rather than subsidies, profits are the best channels towards the realisation of the other motives and personal ambitions which companies and entrepreneurs treasure and which supposedly allow rural revitalisation. So, profits can be accompanied by the *Kokoro Zashi*, the spirit of aspiration, 'seeking an ideal' to do agriculture 'with our own power'(P3). Or they can be accompanied by the spirit of service which distinguishes humanity:

> You can't do service unless you are stable. Service is a contribution. […] After all, it's not just money, but also the spiritual part. But if you don't have breathing room, you cannot serve people. […]. Agriculture will need to be established as an industry. First you have to think about yourself. If it's surviving, there is no surplus to give to others (P14).

Participants are also aware of their limits and do not accept that the revitalisation of the rural socio-economy is their matter to cope with, pointing out that the state needs to transfer funds to the areas through taxes. Few participants push their thoughts beyond subsidies and agriculture and think about the wider state of rural areas. Rather than agriculture itself, or the activities carried out by the numerous local governments with their financial and organisational limitations, the responsibility of the state should be rethinking dramatically its approach to territories through systematic forms of preferential policies.

> If it weren't a national-level policy or something like that, even if the city was doing its best, I guess it would only be able to do things on a one-off, slightly fluffy level. That's why all over Japan, we are in a [similar] situation, and if you do not think about preferential policies to live in the countryside or something like that, if you do nothing more drastically, whatever you do, money will be thrown away without any benefits (P36).

This would allow to overcome the limits of the individual, of the collectivity of individuals, and of the collectivity of rural areas which lack a common direction.

## 5.7 Recap of the findings

The chapter has ventured to show the way in which the state's project for the revitalisation of rural socio-economies through agriculture attempts to become reality. The findings suggest that there are several nodes of conflicts in how the state plans to penetrate rural socio-economies and, hypothetically, revitalise these areas. Firstly, the measures implemented in the NSSZ only benefit corporate agricultural producers. While this is partially intentional, as in the state's project turning agriculture into a profitable industry means essentially replacing the old system made of part-time farming with full-time agriculture, the problem remains that agricultural producers with large capital endowments are mostly non-locals — they need to be attracted to the area. Hilly and mountainous areas are not, by participants' own accounts, easy areas for agriculture, especially of an industrial type. They hence might lack the 'natural' capacity to attract large operations, as non-local companies are mainly attracted by economic motivations. Participants establishing or operating smaller companies, while not reaching the same levels of technologies or employment, have more diversified incentives to stay or return in rural areas, mostly of a social nature. One of the potential advantages that rural areas might retain is linked to the dated truth that agricultural production is different from other industries: some products can obtain their qualities only in some places and participants assess the rural especially based on how it relates to the product. Agriculture can be a self-referential sector.

When looking at how agricultural producers can actively shape the rural, the agricultural sector is arguably not the best positioned. Corporate companies are larger employers, and they see their main responsibilities as providing employment. Not only, however, is agriculture not a sector that employs in consistent numbers, but the quality of jobs is rather low and precarious. Participants aspire to attract the youth back by providing full-time positions with holidays, but they have struggled to turn their ambitions into concrete practices, and they rely overwhelmingly on the local and elder population. Smaller producers do not employ but rely on helpers, family labour and occasional workers, and often play a key role in training the future generation of farmers. Nonetheless, they are way more worried about making ends meet. Overall, companies endorse an attitude of self-help, whereby their main responsibility to the rural locality is indirect: generate profits to be used by the state to make policies for revitalisation. The private sector, in agriculture, does not seem particularly apt at generating new flows of people, or revolutionising work. Hence, from the perspective of coping with demographic changes, agricultural measures might seem very far from helping the regeneration of rural socio-economies. Land might be consolidated, and agricultural production in rural areas might be retained. Nonetheless, the contribution of agriculture to rural resilience seems qualitatively and quantitatively limited.

# 6. The Rural outside Agriculture. Less Conceived, Equally Perceived and Lived

## 6.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This section continues to present the findings from the interviews which contribute to answer the research question 'To what extent can private economic agents influence rural revitalisation', covering the heterogeneous groups of companies. From a more theoretical perspective, this section represents a wider notion of the rural as a locality, what happens outside the gaze of state intervention. Hence, while all space is made of representations of space, spaces of representation and spatial practices (the conceived, the lived and the perceived space), in this finding section the facets of space which are more dominant are those of the lived and the perceived. What the chapter aims to show, as a negative impression, is what endorsing a certain definition of the rural implies. Explanations on the sample included in this findings section and the relative analysis are again found in Section 3.3.2 and Section 3.3.2.3.

## 6.2 The rural that went missing: the transformation of localities

If for agriculture the question why companies *enter* in the sector was relevant in consideration of the wave of new companies entering the region, outside the sector such inquiry would lose much of its meaning, for one of the outstanding features of this variegated group of companies is that they are well-established, locally bred companies[49], surviving in some cases for more than a century and, with only one exception, for at least ten years. Indeed, the view of locality as home, a major motivation pushing participants to establish their business premises in the countryside, is also traceable in U-turners outside agriculture, who, as far as the sample is concerned, concentrate uniquely on professional services. Such perspective on the locality, which emphasises the strength of social bonds for the reproduction of the local socio-economies, has already been explored and will not be replicated for conciseness.

Rather than seeking what motivates individuals to start, or the formation of companies, what can be observed is the continuation and evolution of initial enterprises through different forms of succession. The reasons why most businesses outside the agricultural sector operate in certain sectors are mostly found in the circumstances at the time of their creation. Table 22 provides the period in which companies were formally established, but, as the interviews reveal, the origins of many businesses can be traced back to generations before. This allows to glimpse what the 'rural' was in the past and the rounds of diversification that these local economies underwent before

[49] Only Participant 32 is a non-local company.

becoming what they are today. What emerges in particular is the view of the rural as a pool of resources, ranging from food, wood and metals, from which not only the local population depended, but also part of the bases for the industrialisation of Japan were laid.

*Table 22 Business by foundation date and status*

| Foundation | Family | Family - U-turner | U-turner | Other* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 15 | 2 | 4 | 19 |
| 1700-1939 | P17 | | | |
| | P21 | | | |
| | P35 | | | |
| 1940-1959 | | | | P6 |
| | P28 | | | P38 |
| 1960-1969 | P24 | | | P20 |
| 1970-1979 | P8 | | | P2 |
| | P23 | | | P33 |
| | P30 | | | |
| | P7 | | | |
| 1980-1989 | P16 | P9 | | |
| 1990-1999 | P11 | | P29 | P12 |
| | P13 | | | P15 |
| | | | | P19 |
| | | | | P25 |
| 2000-2009 | P26 | | P37 | P27 |
| | | | | P34 |
| | | | | P32 |
| 2009-2019 | P5 | P31 | P22 | P1 |
| | | | P36 | P3 |
| | | | | P4 |
| | | | | P10 |
| | | | | P14 |
| | | | | P18 |

Agriculture - NSSZ
Agriculture - non-NSSZ
Manufacturing
Services (including retail, accommodation, and professional services)
Construction
Welfare

Note: participants tend to report the year of the formal incorporation, but these companies operated for decades as sole proprietorships (interview materials).

*Including business succession outside the family or new companies created by locals

### 6.2.1 The agrarian origins of the localities and companies: agriculture, climate, and migration

The origins of the local businesses betray the agrarian structure of Yabu and Asago, supporting the view of scholars of the centrality of agriculture for 'rural' socio-economies and the rest of the socio-economy as more or less an effect of the agrarian structure. The relationship between the territory and people in the past has been one of strong dependence: nature decided when it was time to extract and when it was time to process or leave. When people engaged in agriculture could not extract from the territory, they had to migrate or invest in capital, both processes spurring the integration of these socio-economies with innovative, productive centres through the diffusion of technological practices and expertise to rural areas, as well through the constitution of markets for local products.

Such movement of labour and capital in the past is strongly linked in participants' accounts to the limits and opportunities of the primary sector, intended both as farming and as extraction of natural resources, and the climatic conditions of the local areas. Take, for example, two among the oldest businesses in the sample, family businesses trading in the traditional industries of saké (P27, 1702) and soy sauce (P17, 1910). These participants recollect how the initial trigger for the establishment of the companies was the heavy snowfalls of the Tajima area, which made agriculture impracticable in wintertime. It is a well-known fact that farmers relied on supplementary activities off the fields to complement their incomes, either by setting up small food-manufacturing factories in Japanese rural houses or, for the majority, by practising *dekasegi,* the seasonal migration of workers, to larger saké breweries close to urban centres (P13, 17, and 21. See also: Palmer 1983)[50]. Pluriactivity, a major feature of the companies in the sample as well as a feature of the 'rural' more in general, is thus partially the outcome of the intersection between the social and natural ecosystems.

Interestingly enough, the climatic conditions of the area can still exert influence on how people decide to invest and how they diversify in the more recent times: Participant 12 entered the Buddhist ceremonial business, also typical of Japanese rural areas, looking for a whole-year round business whose workflow would not be dependent on or affected by seasonality, while Participant 13 alternates between agriculture and hospitality, and within the hospitality business, between estates in coastal and mountainous areas in the region for the same reasons. Even for consumers' goods seasonality has an influence, as the business slows during the harvest season

[50] As far back as 1968, 664 citizens in Yabu and 645 in Asago left their hometowns to work seasonally in saké breweries, constituting a powerful linkage between the villages that today form Asago city and Yabu city and the wider Kansai region (Palmer 1983).

(P11). Hence, if climatic conditions affect agricultural production in important ways, such as product choice or the industrialisation of agriculture as food factories, the other side of the mirror is that they redirect the flow of capital to enterprises which would not equally suffer these downsides or that could be complementary to agriculture.

### 6.2.2 Embedded in national modernisation and war: extraction, the premises of the productive countryside, and the manufacturing industry

Another important way the legacy of the past is embedded in the present day conformation of the two sites relates to the intricate, national dynamics of Japan's industrialisation. This might look like a long shot, as Japan started its modernisation path as a late comer from the second half of the 19th Century. Nonetheless, what emerges from companies' storytelling is a narrative and fragmented version of what can be reconstructed, with the aid from the literature, as a much deeper history about these places revealing the neglected role of rural areas, especially remote ones, for national rather than local development and for the establishment of Japanese-style industrial hierarchies. This hidden history also provides a certain coherence to the socio-economies of Yabu and Asago as ecosystems built around the exploitation of natural resources by non-native capital.

It was seen in the literature review that the industrialisation of Japan and the penetration of corporate interests in rural areas were linked to the modernisation of the mining industry more than a century ago. Such processes keenly describe the evolution of the two sites. The presence of big corporations in Yabu and Asago is a longstanding one. The Ikuno and Mikobata mines in Asago and the Akenobe mine in Yabu were acquired by one of the most powerful *zaibatsu*, Mitsuibishi, in the 1890s (JHPC, n.d.)[51] and were operative until the 1970s-1980s (Table 23), with two major repercussions for the manufacturing sector and the local fabric. On the one hand, participants' memories are linked to the role of *keiretsu* in the post-war period, and in particular to the role Mitsubishi played as a powerful, often monopsonist, end-buyer which guaranteed the creation and survival of small and medium companies specialising in forms of metal processing or electric components (P33). Subcontracting remains an important practice in the rural areas involved, with its positive and negative sides, and it is a major topic of discussion among

[51] What today is known as the Road of the Ores and promoted as Japanese industrial heritage was an efficient system connecting the three most important mines of the area, the Ikuno mine and the Mikobata mine in Asago and the Akenobe mine in Yabu to the port of Himeji. The mines functioned in synergy for the production and refinement of metals such as zinc, copper and tin, which are used, among others, for coating steel and galvanised anti-corrosive materials (Mitsubishi n.d.). The Ikuno silver mine was important also before being sold to the company. This mine represented 'Japan's march toward industrialization' as one of Japan's top five silver producing mines and the first mine chosen by the Meiji government to undergo modernization with the help of French engineers (JHPC n.d.).

manufacturers. On the other hand, the upcoming closure of the mining sites with the subsequent loss of jobs coincided with national legislation to favour the relocation of manufacturing enterprises through the 1971 Act for the Introduction and Development of Manufacturing Industries in Rural Areas, so that localities activated to find new companies to cushion the loss of jobs. As Participant 2 reported, the companies which moved to the area were attracted by the fact that the labour force was constrained by their relations to land. Hence, scholars have pointed out that agricultural subsidies for part-time farmers in Japan have been as much a direct source to fund the mechanisation of agriculture as they have been an indirect support for struggling manufacturing firms, which allowed to keep wages low (McDonald 1996), often by employing farmers' wives on a part-time basis (Sargent 1980). This surely seems to be the case of the Tajima area, where the average salary was half that of the prefecture (Palmer 1983).

*Table 23: : Production, Employment, and Productivity in the Akenobe and Ikuno mines*

| **Year** | **Volume of output (t)** | | **Number of employees** | | **Productivity per annum (t/man/p.a.)** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Akenobe* | *Ikuno* | *Akenobe* | *Ikuno* | *Akenobe* | *Ikuno* |
| **1945** | 148,406 | 65,910 | 1,079 | 1,283 | 137.540315 | 51.37178488 |
| **1950** | 260,354 | 202,888 | 1,584 | 1,714 | 164.364899 | 118.3710618 |
| **1955** | 310,119 | 239,288 | 1,753 | 1,713 | 176.907587 | 139.6894337 |
| **1960** | 261,338 | 249,751 | 1,569 | 1,576 | 166.563416 | 158.4714467 |
| **1965** | 329,324 | 257,864 | 1,325 | 1,148 | 248.546415 | 224.6202091 |
| **1970** | 359,477 | 155,557 | 844 | 594 | 425.920616 | 261.8804714 |
| **1975** | 324,803 | - | 524 | - | 619.853053 | - |
| **1980** | 304,680 | - | 406 | - | 750.44335 | - |
| **1982** | 316,408 | - | 406 | - | 779.330049 | - |
| **Peak employment: 1953** | 317,645 | 222,841 | 1,806 | 1,778 | 175.883167 | 125.332396 |
| Source: Hyogo Prefectural Office (unpublished data) in: (Palmer 1983,178). The Akenobe mine closed operations in 1987 while the Ikuno mines closed in 1973 | | | | | | |

Linked to state and industrial capital and manufacturing is also the move of the heavy industry in rural areas. Manufacturing businesses recall the role of rural areas as safe places during war efforts as significant moments for their *raison d'être*. So, a producer of agricultural machinery parts (P38) was originally an ammunition supplier working steel, while the rather numerous businesses born as springs manufacturers in the area, especially in Asago, were related to a single

event, the transfer of spring factories from the outskirts of Ōsaka to the countryside during the war. According to Participant 20, 33, and 38, there were not many factories in these local areas before the war, when the evacuation of factories from the cities took place as a measure to protect factories from air bombing and provide stable sources of food to workers. Local people employed in the relocated factories learnt the techniques of making springs so that, when the companies returned to their original sites, those craftsmen established new businesses by spinning off into various independent businesses. Some of these businesses, such as the participants in the research, kept on adapting and still operate today.

### 6.2.3 Going down, going up: forestry and welfare

The remaining companies operate in two other sectors, forestry, a traditional sector in decline, and welfare, a booming sector in rural areas.

A relatively important resource for the local economies derives from forestry, in which both construction and manufacturing businesses are involved. Again, although the companies were formally established in the 1970s-1980s, the roots of these businesses can be very old, even extending to the previous sixth generation (P16). During the post-War period, the demographic boom had led to a thriving housing market, and the mines also constituted another important market for locally produced wood (P8). According to Participant 8, when his father started as a sole proprietor selling timber in 1951, Japanese wood was a product in high demand, and dealing in timber was a common form of self-employment. Carpentry was also a common undertaking for migrant workers (P7, 16, 23).

Only in the 1970s did the need to establish factories or companies for such activities emerge, changing the nature of work and reflecting the formalisation of economic activities. This is also the period in which rural socio-economies were able to transfer state projects to rural areas. Moreover, since the 1960s, wood imports were liberalised, pushing diversification within companies. As another eclectic manufacturer (P24) whose father also worked timber stated, 'one needed to bring food to the table' and, in his words, it was obvious that diversification meant entering the secondary sector as 'for the Japanese, it is inevitable: we are suited to manufacturing'. Other companies, on the contrary, keep operating in the construction business, either in housing or, most commonly, mixing housing with government commissions, with manufactured goods, or even entering retail.

Finally, looking at the welfare sector, the two 'companies' visited are social welfare corporations, non-tax-paying, semi-public facilities which are privately managed but mostly publicly funded, established in the 1990s. The entry of private entities in the sector was a response to the ageing

of the population and larger changes in the national healthcare sector legislation[52]. According to Participant 19, there were three or four special nursing homes in the Northern part of the Hyōgo prefecture (compared to 20 in the present) when companies were invited by the local government to build facilities with state subsidies (P19) or manage existing ones (P25).

As these facilities are expensive to build and hard to maintain, and as available subsidies have drastically diminished considering the booming costs of the healthcare system in the ageing society, another booming period in the publicly funded welfare sector is unlikely (Tanaka and Iwasawa 2010; Hatano et al. 2017). In-house care is expected, and many U-turners come back to their native places to fulfil their caring role. The reverse side of the in-house care is that some private companies started to be formed around the needs of families in terms of medical devices and services for the silver generation (P22 and 26), although a marketised healthcare sector struggles to root in Japan (Miyazaki 2019).

It is evident that rural ecosystems are not static nor mono-sectoral, despite the fact that natural resources played a significant role in attracting non-local capital and investments to the areas. Characterised by innovations which are gradual, waves of reconstitution towards the expected and unexpected, the diversity of occupations and activities in rural areas has significantly varied during decades of development, making of rural socio-economies complex and diversified realities.

## 6.3 Beyond the materiality of the rural: the 'human factor' of the countryside

In the case of agriculture, the materiality of the local ecosystem prevails in how companies interpret the locality, for the good or the bad. When looking at the heterogeneous sample, a wider array of facets of the locality surface which proves that immaterial aspects of the locality also play an important role for attracting companies. In the heterogeneous sample too, it is possible to find market size and quality discussed, and the patterns are similar to the agricultural sector. Small companies with local sales suffer the weakness of the market, while those who produce without being constrained to place by sales usually concentrate on the local resources offered by the countryside, including the positive externalities that agriculture and agricultural policies bring to food manufacturing (P21). Few people means few customers (and less competition), although even in such dire conditions, there are those who thrive. Such is the case for commercial activities

[52] In 1990, the Ten-Year Strategy to Promote Health and Welfare for the Aged (the "Gold Plan') was formulated to set up the infrastructure necessary to provide health and welfare services for the elderly, and, after a wave of legislative changes, the management of elderly care infrastructure and the draft of healthcare plans shifted from prefectures to local municipalities (Shuichi 2018).

located in particularly good spots, such as in trafficked highways (P27), or for those who are tailoring their services to specific demographic configurations. 'Wreath is a business', as Participant 12 recites, and traditional funeral rituals flourish in the era of the ageing society, endangered only by the 'wave of urban-type ceremonies that rush the countryside '. And so does the medical-related industry, from orthopaedics to the sales of medical devices and products.

Nonetheless, if juxtaposed to the agricultural sector, the 'human factor' (P24) figures prominently as a feature of the localities studied, an integral quality or part of the socio-economy, and something which companies absorb, willingly or reluctantly, from the local environment. Such a human factor covers both immaterial aspects, including relationships between business and the local society or between business, employees and the local society, and more material and measurable ones, such as the labour market and the availability or costs of workers. Observed from a bird's eye view, the immaterial human factor is associated with the strengths or positive aspects that the local socio-economic system offers to companies, and in particular to those operating in direct contact with people and relying on the local market (hence found especially in the service sector). These are also mostly small, family or first-generation companies of U- or I-turners (i.e., the founder is an entrepreneur-manager relocating to the area). The material human factor appears, on the contrary, more nuanced: although it is often firstly associated with weaknesses or negative aspects of the locality, it quickly turns into a positive side.

Although treated by participants as part and parcel of the local socio-economy, immaterial aspects of the human factor are ripe for ambiguities. There are two main reasons for this ambiguity, relating firstly to the context in which relationships are mentioned, and secondly, to how pre-existing ideas of what a society is or should be, and what relationships should be like in a rural areas, are projected either to create new realities or to find justifications for certain working styles.

On the one side, participants acknowledge the economic value in specific immaterial relationships[53]. A certain business *savoir faire* underlies why, for some companies, human relationships are important. Word-of-mouth, family-purchases, repeat customers or easier collaborations among companies are part of the trade secrets of small businesses in the face of price competition by larger companies: 'SMEs need to get customers, and they must have some special characteristics. Whether it is a product, the way they do things, [it must be] something

[53] For instance, participants in hospitality are aware of the existence of a rural imaginary attached to traditional housing style, and are aware that bigger companies sell this as an experience. Nonetheless, they do not seek to leverage on such potential, as they 'don't think it's something. I was born and raised in a rural building' (P35). Rather than a refusal of the marketisation and commodification of a certain lifestyle, the lack of engagement with such immaterial potential seems the result of habit and being satisfied with the quality of the business as it is.

that the large companies do not have' (P11). Trust relationships and a strong ethos of servicing compensate for the inability of smaller companies to retain their small market shares through price.

Nonetheless, it does not seem a coincidence that the participants who emphasise the most such traits are also those who struggled to identify in the first place any benefits of the rural or answer by stating their intended contributions to the area. The immaterial human factor mostly emerges as a locational strength when the material basis in the company's foundations is limited (e.g., companies do not make a physical product): when tackling the negative aspects of the locality, all participants become very concrete and think in economic transactional terms, and immateriality disappears. Hence, only positive tropes of the rural are discussed: the expansive nature of people (9), the feeling of intimacy 'unique to the countryside which makes people feel good' (26), or trust, connection to place, and family-like relationships (7,11, 16, 25,29). Even when self-aware of reproducing the archetypical answer, participants just go on to reaffirm it, remarking that its cliché nature is not privy of substance: 'the food is delicious, the air is fresh, and people are warm. It's not the same everywhere, but people in the countryside always say that. But this is really the charm of the countryside' (P37)[54].

On the other hand, the immaterial perspective of the 'human factor', that is, the idea that a certain type of local society exists which supports companies' operations can be itself a fact, so that the attributes of 'goodness' of the locality can be embedded *within* the company environment, and may have a performative effect, creating — rather than finding — the locality. The rural is made based on what participants feel are its characteristics and shaping the company along these aspirations. A local ('rural') company is thus not a company in the locality ('rural'), as for Participant 37:

> When I started my business, I was working in the same style as a company in Osaka or a company in the city. After several years of staying up all night …, I came to think about whether it would be really good to do the same kind of business as in the city in such a rich, natural environment … [or] whether I could develop a business style that was unique to the countryside. I aim to create a company that can grow together with our families for the trouble we have caused them, with the community and the people of the community, by making it possible for example to play with our families at the company's playground or in the gymnasium…[55]. […] In the countryside, it is difficult to run a company unless you consider the family and the community as well. […] That's really all there is to it when it comes to human connections. Also, it's the same with connections with employees. That's a present for my birthday this year. […] The photograph is made of cells portraying the smile of employees of the company, and the cells make up my own smile… . The message it gives is that everyone's smile makes the president's smile. That present is so special and warm. That's why there is a spirit of unity to overcome difficulties. I think this kind of things don't really happen in big cities and other places alike. If something happens to the family, we'll do what we can to help, and although it's not a "win-win" situation, it strengthens the bond between us (P37).

[54] An almost identical answer to: 'Asago is really a good environment. The water is beautiful, the air is delicious, and they are all good people, they are kind' (P23)

[55] The business premises are in what used to be a school, and its sports facilities can be used by the population. This company has been suggested as a model for rural revitalisation by the Yabu's City Hall.

The rural is in the head of the participant before becoming a 'thing', something elaborated mentally, in private, and transferred into a certain management style. It is also oppositional, as it stands for what the urban cannot offer: a source of peace versus the chaotic city, the altruistic versus the individualistic society, a place of breathing nature and not suffocating cement. Such idea of locality *precedes* any externalisations or acts of the individual, and whether other companies coming or operating in the rural would find such attributes in the locality would be dependent on their sharing a certain vision of the locality, the experiential luggage of the individual, and their reflexivity.

Care needs, however, to be exercised, as the performative character of some ideas does not necessarily create an equal advantage for the locality. Some ideas on the rural and rural relationships might in fact conceal, under cherishing words, not so idyllic and more established realities. Ideas of (a rural) society are not homogeneous, and the concept of 'human relationships' as the root of the rural society is a double edge sword, which can help reinforce hierarchies or relationships implying a certain subservience of employees:

> The countryside is about human relationships, life is about the connection between people, about helping out and looking out for each other. […] It's very different from the urban area. […] If I work for a company, there are people that I know. Hence, if there is something that comes up in a job, you help each other. Even outside of work, you have that connection and a family-like atmosphere, and it is a heart-warming company. The company is not just a place where you come in, make things, and that's the end of it; it is a place where the company is part of the rhythm of life. […] It's about harmony, it isn't just about the task itself. […] I always tell my employees that work should be fun, work happily, and you can even get a salary. On the other hand, if you don't like your family, you will not do well in the job. […] it is difficult to describe in words the atmosphere. […] It's even more productive. We are human after all, and we have different heavy feelings in our hearts, and we do not know how to express it. Carrying that weight and working does not bode well. […] But if you have a lot of harmony, and if you have fun, you won't have that. For in the end, the benefits and productivity will increase, and the attendance will be high. Going to work will not be a burden. I think that it should be fun (P24).

In the case above, the Japanese concept of harmony (和 *wa*)(see: Midooka 1990; Leung, Koch, and Lu 2002), evoked as the organising principle of the rural society under the pillar of family, justifies the expectations on the full commitment of employees to the company. This might be part of the 'charm' of the rural too, at least from companies' perspective, and cannot be excluded from what the rural is. The constraints on the mobility of workers are a powerful attraction for companies, equally benefitting non-local and local companies. Existing (non-rural) literature has pointed out that the concept of Japanese harmony in industrial relationships has been interpreted as containing the fundamental duality between capital and labour, whereby, on the one hand, there is a 'normative unitarist interpretation of the relations among ownership, management and workforce … usually hypothesized to have arisen from the "groupism" of the Confucian heritage', which seems to fit well the account of the participant and which sees the firm as the guarantor of employees' lives in a win-win situation, and, on the other, an 'actual practice … characterized by manipulation and exploitation [where] the salaryman pays a huge price for his job security and career ladder'(Johnston and Selsky 2005, 192). The limits of the sample, which excludes workers,

do not allow a further exploration of the latter aspect. The immaterial side of the rural is indeed perceived as a locational advantage portrayed overwhelmingly in positive terms, but the bases upon which such importance originate do not necessarily suggest an equal distribution of benefits among the various stakeholders of the locality.

## 6.4 Demographic changes as an intrinsic 'dimension of the countryside'

When looking at demographic changes, there is a thread that connects the whole sample, underlining the importance of considering, from a more general perspective, the level and type of engagement companies have with the territory. How participants consider the locality is influenced by what companies rely on the territory for. The majority of participants exporting products retain the use of a production framework, and the emphasis is overwhelmingly on the relationship between capital and labour. Non-exporters, on the contrary, use a market framework, focusing on how the impact on sales shapes their survival opportunities. Construction companies, the worst hit by depopulation, stand at the centre, deadlocked in-between changing markets and changing production.

However, outside agriculture, it is more common that the long-term dynamics of depopulation and outmigration cease to be socio-economic processes and are positioned as established attributes of the locality. While in the agricultural sector issues about labour and the labour market were connected to demographic changes, in the heterogeneous sample the lack of unqualified or qualified workers is regarded as a 'dimension of the countryside' in consideration of the fact that 'the production worker does not remain in this region' (P24).

The perceived severity of demographic changes runs on a scale and, arguably, is relative to the overall conditions of the company rather than absolute to the socio-economy. Companies with more potential for mobility, or where the production can be separated from the market (i.e., exportable products and services), do not necessarily see a problem in labour supply or production (P17 and 21), and, when they do, they often soften it by framing it in terms of the alternatives they have. What is initially portrayed as a disadvantage tends to turn into a locational advantage. Partially, this is because of a factor mentioned multiple times: workers are tied to places in which the type of jobs are limited. Hence, if it's true that there are more people close to cities and that rural areas are depopulating, the lower status and name of smaller manufacturing companies makes other venues unpalatable options as

> no one comes to a nameless and poor company. Recently, people will come if you pay a little extra. […] where you have no connection, no wisdom, no relatives, no blood [ties], you have to rely on foreign workers' (P28).

Although the 'fight' among companies exists at the local level (P20), the need to stay away from areas where large manufacturers operate to avoid competition for labour (P28 and 38) is such

that some companies recognise that their businesses could only survive in rural areas, as 'there is almost no turnover' (P37), generating extra perks in terms of safer investments in personnel training (P37) and of protection of industrial secrets (P33). But it is also true that it is fallacious to understand labour issues as separated from other factors, and it is fairer to talk, as participants do, of combinations of human and non-human factors, such as the 'Tottori model' of 'cheap labour costs and cheap land' (P15)[56]. These are, for example, the criteria used by companies for openings outside their current location or the relocation of parts of production abroad, with other drivers being proximity to customers and, for new factories, the absence of seismic risks (although depopulation and ageing have been proved to decrease the capacity of populations to organise in the advent of natural calamities (Committee of International Affairs 2017). Hence, participants do not look for a single factor in places, but rather, specific combinations for production, just like in agriculture, finding places where it is possible to reproduce their management practices as they expand or relocate. What appears as an overall limited and decreasing labour market might still be bigger than what available when companies need to compete through salaries.

For those dependent on the locality as a market the side effects are already working as a full-fledged force. Previous studies have shown that the crunch of the socio-economic fabric begins from the exit of retailers and local small businesses, causing problems such as access to basic necessities or the loss of vitality of commercial streets, but also driving rural companies to increase their connections outside the locality (Yakushiji and Takahashi 2013; Horiuchi 2017). This is found in Yabu and Asago, too. The lack of mobility of companies in construction, welfare, and most services makes them less armed with solutions, so that downsizing, closure, reliance of family as pools of talents, or cuts in the services provided become part of the slow movement that is rural decline: not in chunks, but in bits. For some industries, the direct repercussions on societies are worrisome in terms of impact on the quality of life of people. In nursing care homes, which operate at their maximum capacity with long waiting lists (P19), the admission of patients is at risk despite the availability of beds, as the profession becomes more labour-intensive after changes in industrial legislation, and recruitment challenging even for companies awarded as excellent employers by governmental institutions (P25). Collaborations between companies lead the conversation for construction companies, as companies face the dilemma that hiring personnel might be inefficient for the overall financial feasibility of the company, considering irregular business cycles, raising salaries and the lack of specialised workforce — all factors

[56] One of the neighbouring prefectures in the Chūgoku region of Honshu, known for its products but also as manufacturing base for electronic components, devices and machineries (JETRO 2022). The Tottori model is not a socio-economic model in the Japanese industrial literature, but a simplification provided by the participant of the logic which localities use to induce economic growth in regions through companies.

contributing to explain why in the construction sector companies tend to diversify in manufacturing and agriculture.

### 6.4.1 The collapse of the rural: alternative visions of political nature

Arguably, being exposed first hand, as *businesses* and as *citizens*, to the shrinking of the local market, made of people, plays a role on why the discussion on demographic changes has inspired more introspection and reflexivity about the role of small businesses in the wider economy in the latter group. Although these are cases rather than trends, a more qualitative perspective reveals yet another interpretation of the rural, this time of political nature, which is linked to the understanding of capitalism in rural socio-economies.

Such perspectives echo at points the works on degrowth (Gerber 2020), alternative (McCarthy 2006), diverse (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020) or moral economies (Keene 2015), which, while not synonymous, all contain in their essence matters of sustainability and ethical values. Participants refuse the view that the capitalist system is the only economic possible one or that profit is the parameter for wealth, thus purporting that a variety of economic practices exist in our world which should not be reduced to remnants of pre-modern economies. Hence, participants emphasise their unwillingness to grow just for growing, the limits and value of operating as small companies, and the way demographic changes, especially outmigration in the search for better salaries, have been spurred by the disruption of the balance between society and the economy and the understatement of the local socio-economy.

By far the best and most extreme example is Participant 17, a soy sauce producer. Forced to 'expand' to urban and international markets considering the deep decline of local sales — a journey of self-identity discovery that brought 'encouragement, pride, and an opportunity for growth' — the participant reflects:

> So, I have been making this soy sauce in my hometown, and the business condition is getting worse. […] since large soy sauce manufacturers distributes throughout the country, even if we are gone, there is no problem for consumers. […] However, if I were to problematize whether there is a lot of delicious soy sauce at mass produced, low prices, and no one would care if we didn't exist, I think that is another story. […] In the past, food culture and local culture have always been local food cultures. So, when we think about whether the current situation is truly appropriate, we thought that there was a role that we would play.
>
> […] In Japanese rural villages, it is often said that there is no place to work. If you were to work, a good working place is something like a civil servant, because the private sector is extremely weak […] So, there is a relationship that makes it more difficult to work in the private sector. That said, self-sufficiency and self-sufficient farming … happens a lot, and, in reality, our life here is very cheap. Originally, because of the self-sufficiency of this region, our life was possible even if it was not 100% incorporated into the currency, money economy. So, together with small establishments in this area, although wages were cheap, there was a relationship that could guarantee an affluent life. But it is collapsing... Therefore, even in rural areas, everything is in the form of money. If it is based only on currency, if it is only in that form, people are not able to live without money and they will work in urban areas with good salaries and will not come back to the countryside. How will this rural area, that retains such non-capitalistic and non-economic aspects, express its richness? Can we begin to acknowledge its richness? I think that's the question of whether or not future rural villages can survive. Therefore, there is a mechanism that can guarantee a more affluent life by living here, even if the salary as currency is not so high. So, we must

> make that kind of environment where talented people gather in Yabu. If you don't make it, it's hard to guarantee that a small company can pay high wages. Because the scale is not big. Small things must survive being small, it's kind of important to live. I suppose that small things can become big and that might be a good thing in itself, but if you become that, maybe there is something that you cannot do. There are things you can't do by making it bigger (P17).

As an experienced, aged citizen, Participant 17 remembers the still fundamental notion that the local economy has been based as much on formality as informality and only the interaction between the two could guarantee 'affluence' to its citizens. If looking at the wage relationship only, rural small companies lack the capacity to close the gap with urban centres and thus stop outmigration — that leverage might simply not exist when operating at the margins of profitability. What can fill the gap, at the private level, is the jointure between two elements. On the one side, there is the material element, that is, the inclusion in people's lives of subsistence practices, gifting, and sharing for the satisfaction of households' needs which render agriculture so deeply embedded in rural areas, not as an economic sector, but as a life-supporting activity which allows the rest of the economic fabric to benefit from its presence. On the other side, there is the ideological element: refusing the idea and practice that the money economy is the only way to create affluence, as affluence means not wealth.

Again, this is not a rejection of technological advancements, as production processes in most companies are as mechanised as possible. Nor is it a grand discourse against big corporations *per se,* although there is strong scepticism on the business sustainability of models that, after bringing to 'collapse' small shops (P35), might not survive in the face of depopulation and dropping tourist numbers. It is not even fully anti-capitalistic, as it does not denounce that a part of the market economy can be integrated in the local fabric, rather selectively entering it to gain support of the wider public for small causes.

It is, however, an appeal to the moral economy, which begs the conceptual reconsideration of what the economy is made of and for. In good part, as participants up to this point continue to ignore the state as a potential source of change[57], this starts from individual commitment. Hence, if we go back to the strengths of the locality, participants emphasised the goodness of relationships in rural areas, but it appears that such aspect fails to reach the new generation. Other participants have recognised that demographic changes, especially outmigration, are connected to a certain sense of underachievement if the youth stays in the locality and the deprivation of place-based dignity. While tertiary education in Japan is a monopoly of the city and hence only limited advanced education can be received outside it[58], Participant 32, a non-local

[57] The exception is Participant 25, operating a nursing care home, which points out that it is the government's duty to assist companies in recruitment to cope with demographic changes.
[58] The first four-year university programme in the Tajima area has been opened in 2021 (Professional College for Arts and Tourism). Another educational institution is the Hyogo Prefecture Tajima Technical College, offering two year courses in engineering and business management.

who travelled extensively in rural Japan, argues that local economies are 'committing suicide' by inculcating in children and young people the need 'to go to the city' instead of 'loving more these villages', while Participant 12 talks about instilling in the youth 'the feeling of being valued', 'to work to realise dreams', and the need to convey 'why we work' (to which the answer of the participant is, to make people happy).

An unorganised counter movement is ongoing in the many, scattered actions of private individuals. If there is a focal point in which 'rural activism' takes place, it concerns the number of activities at the school level in which numerous companies from all sectors equally participate to promote not only their professions in the hope to conquer the hearts of the future, but also more awareness on what an ageing population means: 'After all, young people have a sense that nursing care industry is a difficult job, everyone has this image. We need to replace it and communicate that everyone will grow older. It is an important process' (P25). On the one hand, one wonders if better political coordination could create the preconditions for change. On the other hand, as mentioned before, relying on the ideological aspect always comes with the risks of ignoring forms of exploitation of workers and the weakest. Only a study which analyses *contemporaneously* both human sides of the firm, the entrepreneur/owner/manager, and workers (of whatever type, including networks for self-employed), rather than the two as separate spheres, might bring clarity to whether ideologies are sources of power or sources of liberation and freedom of thought and action.

There is yet another case which is worth emphasising, because of the way demographic changes are explicitly internalised within the company. That is the case of Participant 37, a U-turner highly motivated to bring change and among the few participants to mention the WSR:

> the decrease in young workers and the working population is a negative factor for future business development. However, when I think about our company on a macro scale, I think about what we can do. […] we still need to make our own efforts, for example, by having people from the cities come to work for us, and make sure that …they do not quit when we have them. If we don't have a system in place, … young people will not return to their hometown after graduating from university, and this is a big problem for us. On the contrary, if we want them to come back, I think that we need to start from the company to create a corporate environment where people want to come back. Even if the whole world is like that, we need to create a solid system to secure human resources in our small macro world. Recently, people are talking about reforming the way they work, and I'm already working on it. I think … we can change the speed of the aging society and the speed of our company. The average age of our 60 employees is usually in the early 30s, which is envied by other companies around us. […] we add young people every year. In that sense, we are a company where young people are working vigorously. If you appeal to them about this, young people will come again.

This is the only participant in the sample who has not expressed a feeling of powerlessness, unavoidability, or a wait-and-see attitude in front of the cumulative downward trend. Noticeably, the participant's primary activity is exporting services, a unique case in the sample. Elements of desirability in terms of profession might be more important than acknowledged by the participant in explaining the success of the company in hiring such a young workforce.

## 6.5 How companies outside agriculture shape the rural

### 6.5.1 Understanding broader trends in employer-employee relations

In a pattern similar to that seen in agriculture, the significance of the employer-employee relationship takes on different nuances in larger and smaller companies and in the way they are able to give back to the locality. From a general perspective, the sample presents some interesting trends on the directions that companies are taking to rethink their relationship with workers. A lot of attention of larger employers (in manufacturing and welfare) goes to adaptational efforts in their 'human resources' practices to cope with the diminishing and ageing workforce, while smaller companies tend to internalise their struggles by relying on the family, occasional workers, or through collaborations, something particularly evident in the construction sector. While a few companies see the employer and employee relationship as fundamental both for the companies' ethos and for driving change of the rural, changes in the employer-employee relationship appear to be very modest and gradual. Rather than actively planning, make-do seems to better describe the attitude of companies, and it is out of need that many new practices are being introduced in rural workplaces. Hence, while companies might still be able to sustain the reproduction of the local socio-economic fabric in the short term and while positive developments are indeed taking place, the difficulties that companies encounter and their coping mechanisms point out that their actions and agency alone, without proper support, might not be sufficient to alter the spiral of decline that these socio-economies are witnessing.

Looking at the whole sample, providing employment and business expansion are reported as major responsibilities and contributions made by the private sector to support local revitalisation. However, whereas employing agricultural companies, as new ventures creating employment from scratch, tended to emphasise 'employment-for-employment', with no mention of labour-friendly or labour-oriented measures, the focus in the heterogeneous group is decisively more on qualitative changes. Compared to agricultural companies, more concrete and straightforward answers, based not only on the aspirations of companies, but also on their past doings, were provided by participants. Hence, by looking at the heterogeneous sample it is possible to know how the employer-employee relationship works in rural areas or what type of practices companies consider with reference to work.

As a matter of fact, many of the measures recall the WRS, the series of proposals and laws for the corporate sector meant to increase the productivity, improve the work-life balance of workers and erase inequalities in the labour market to counteract the negative effects of the decreasing demography (Isamu 2017), but the motivations driving change are different among groups of companies. Roughly, in the manufacturing sector they are mostly driven by the labour emergency;

more idealist and ideological positions towards achieving work-life balance, occasionally influenced by current politics, are common in younger companies and U- and I-turners, while regulations and audits figure in the welfare sector.

Below, what is looked at is how participants discuss their relationship with specific segments of the population: ageing workers, women, migrant workers, the young Japanese, and how they see the jobs they offer as meeting the needs for the renovation of rural socio-economies.

#### *6.5.1.1 Ageing workers: a better alternative than no workers*

The local and demographic context has led many manufacturers to rethink about the potential of certain social groups as pools of talents. If one were to stretch the argument, in today's jargon it could be said that more inclusive practices are being introduced in the workplace. The first place where participants look for solving their labour issues is within the organisation. 'After all, retirement and quitting are the most troublesome', said Participant 24. Continuation of employment beyond standard retirement age (60 years old) arguably constitutes the most important palliative undertaken by participants. It is not only the agricultural sector which is ageing and has learnt to coexist with an ageing workforce: other sectors are ageing too, and this is especially evident in manufacturing.

Elder workers have become an essential part of the productive economy to the point that the destiny of some companies hangs on their availability: 'Right now, we're getting by, but [as] the age range is already high […] there is a possibility that the scale of production will decrease at once because there won't be any elderly people left' (P38). This form of retention of the labour force mostly happens through the extension of the working contract without a change in salary conditions rather than as 'in a normal company, [where] the retirement age is 60 years old, and the salary decreases until you have to completely stop at age 65' (P28), or through the outright elimination of the mandatory retirement age whereby, maybe not sounding very appealing, 'you can work all the time until you die' (P34). Businesses hold tight to their elder employees and readjust tasks and working times, so that people in this age group can perform their duties:

> We are working on shortening the working hours for local people even if their bodies get a little tired, so that they can stay with the company as long as possible.... [Their status] is basically the same as that of a regular employee. However, the amount of time is a little less, or lighter. There's also the issue of responsibility. We try to give them jobs that they can do individually at their own pace, for lack of a better word. That's why most of the elderly people have been working for this company for a long time and have reached retirement age. They have all the skills and knowledge to do the job. […] I'm still working with the skills I've acquired until now, even after I pass 60. I'm still working with what my body has memorized. My eyesight may be a little bad, though (P33).

That little age-based discrimination appears in manufacturers' accounts should hardly be surprising, considering that their own average age in the sample is 54 years, placing many participants in the same age (and gender) group as their employees. Culture too might play a role,

and the Japanese society is one often recognised for the respect of the silver age. But there is also a recognition that the experience of the elders, and even the rhythms by which they work, can have an impact on innovation. The newly patented product of Company 28, where the management style of the owner is open to employees' self-expression and individual creativity, not only has a labour-decreasing nature which allows elders to work in the construction sector, but was also pivoted by a 70 year old employee:

> He developed the technology, and the company mastered it, and he will be 70 years old. So, if that person is normally just playing around, I really don't care. Sometimes, out of the blue, he says something like 'make this'. That's why I want those people to stay here even for a half-a-day (P28).

Despite most businesses being accommodating on the requirements of ageing employees, it should be noted that the active hiring of elders outside the companies' existing base of workers was either not cited or framed upon rigid conditions, such as the need to be acquainted with the utilisation of the companies' technology (P24).

Elders' employment is less emphasised in the rest of the sample, with good reasons. In several family businesses in hospitality and retail, the head of the household and of the company is the eldest member, and because businesses are run within the family, succession looks at younger generations. Taking care of the elders essentially revolves around the question of whether the offspring will continue the business, as an element of hope and fear insinuates participants' thoughts:

> The middle child is a boy, he is an ophthalmologist in Osaka. I'm not sure if he is willing to come back here or not. [...] But to come back and take this business over, he needs to learn about running a business… . He says that he will come home and take care of us, but just not now. But who knows? He might not have thought about it that much. So, for example, if my wife or I get sick, then he might come home right away without any thought. In that sense, … if he returns, things will be okay very quickly. But he may or may not have the intention to come back home, but I wish he would just come home (P11).

Elders might be employed from the Silver Human Resources Centre as occasional workers, but not to any significant extent. In the construction sector, as physical works on site are dangerous, it is obviously problematic to rely on elders, whose bodies might be more fragile (P29), although they still have a role in the traditional housing sector, where the relation between master carpenter and apprentices is core to passing down refined and often unique techniques. For other companies, challenges with ageing or aged employees come from the increased technologisation of the field. For instance, as new ways to monitor patients' health must be introduced in the workplace, elders need to learn to use new devices and get accustomed to more rigid regulations than those when they might first have entered the sector (P25), while in digital services elders were hired only as mentors — essentially meaning they would need to be experts to be employed (P37).

#### *6.5.1.2 A difficult situation: women and rural employment*

The engagement of the elderly is especially important in industries where there is a limited capacity of companies to attract women. This is the case of some industries in manufacturing, excluding the textile industry where many employees are women (mostly 'housewives', according to Participant 30). Local manufacturers have had a difficult time attracting women, or, to be precise, involving them in the processing phases of manufacturing rather than clerical jobs (e.g. P8, 33).

One might wonder if there is a gender-bias in the way companies employ, but the answer is mixed. There are indeed jobs that are heavy to perform, but also there appear to be socio-cultural expectations and limitations in some industries. A crystal clear example is the sake industry, where women have for long been forbidden to participate. The statement 'For us, sake brewing is a man's job' as 'you need stamina' (P 21) might testify about the hardships of the job, but, based on the national numbers, there are approximately 50 breweries (out of 1500 nationwide) run by *toji*[59] women, some of them using traditional, labour-intensive methods (Smookler 2021). The *possibility* for women is there, and the Participant has a partial ability to decide and to promote alternatives. Hence, whereas the industry might not be particularly appealing, 'for us' would need to be better qualified in order to discard cultural or subjective frameworks and understand which groups effectively share the view. Indeed, it is said that many jobs in Japan that are based on the exquisite master of crafts or skills, such as chefs, are dominated by men.

For the majority of jobs and tasks, however, participants remarked that women *could* perform them, and they indeed wish they would:

> Women don't want to work on site. There are some jobs that women can do and are heavy, but there are also some that are lighter. And I think there are many jobs that women can do. I'd like to see it become like that (P38).

> Probably, for heavy equipment operations, even a woman can do it. I mean, it's not good to say 'even a woman.' I think they can do it. But I still think that it is quite difficult for a woman to apply for that job (P8).

In their accounts, women are not interested in the type of jobs provided, something which participants relate unanimously to women's childcare responsibilities and for the majority to the general perception that manufacturing jobs are not suitable for women.

> A woman was in charge of a factory near here, so we were trying to recruit mainly female workers, but no one came. The image of working with iron was simply too bad, heavy, dirty and rough on your hands….even if [our company name] says iron, it's only such a thin thing [tubes]. So, we decided from the get go that no female workers would come, and at first, we [recruited] people from China. More like middle-aged women, because

[59] *Toji* (杜氏 )are master brewers. The origins of the term are debated, but it is thought that originally housewives (also pronounced *Toji* but written with a different kanji, 刀自) would start the fermentation by spitting on rice grains, and that sake brewing was a woman's role.

> everyone was already married… It doesn't matter if [the workers] are female. It doesn't matter if they are young or old, it doesn't matter at all. Anyone will do (P28).

As in the case of elders, the most common way to attract or retain women is based on the flexibility of working times and contracts. Participant 34's three tiered system, for instance, differentiates between part-time, friendly, and full-time employees, which correspond to no benefits, little benefits, and big benefits, granted for working outside the normal hours. Thus, whereas 'young people nowadays only look at the many vacations and the high cost of living…, women who are married and over 30 years old ... don't only look for vacations and money. They also look at those conditions'. Similar arrangements are found in other companies, and the scenarios depicted for swapping between contracts are always based on the child's growth: part-time when the kid is small, friendly when it grows, and full-time when reaching maturity. This might be penalising in terms of benefits received, and is even less encouraging because of the stubborn associations between women, motherhood and gender roles, which are very persistent in the localities studied.

Unusual, contradictory nuances in contexts where the individuality of a woman as a professional is valorised in action (rationally) but diminished relative to the 'feminine' nature in words (irrationally) also surfaced when participants talked between each other.

> How did you decide to make a woman a factory manager?
> She worked the hardest. But if you were to ask me whether she has the make-up of a leader, she doesn't.
> Communication.
> She also does not have any communication skills. No, not really.
> And she is not so considerate.
> She is not so friendly. Yeah.
> And she cannot take a joke.
> She isn't funny and there are times when she screams at the girls. I have to tell her to stop speaking in that way.
> Her motherly instinct is limited…
> She is single. She cleans up her area really nicely. She is impressive in that regards, she is really tidy.
> Because it is a job site, she is good at organizing the site.
> So now, it's just young men. And she is getting a little gentler. She thinks that if she is too strict, they will do the opposite. I scared her into it.
> Her sense of trust in their work is a little (Participants intentionally omitted).

While the employee has been promoted based on her merits (the hardest working), something *done* and *recognised* by the participant, the qualities that are expected from her are those of care (the motherly instinct) and gentleness rather than firmness or authority, and organisation is not a professional skill but an extension of maniacal 'singlehood' behaviour. Hence, the contradiction: discursively diminishing, but in practice less discriminatory. Although surely the local socio-economy might impose on women unfair burdens and expectations (for which it is not possible to assume either resistance or acceptance), the flexibility of hours is a relative improvement, meaning that at least the barriers to women's participation are being lowered (and companies have some success in recruiting). But more 'progressive' workplace practices were not mentioned in manufacturing, with the exception of one participant offering childcare or nursing care leave

(P20). Company-based childcare or vouchers, maternity *and* paternity benefits, incentives for career development or any other measures which might put women under equal working conditions are not present in the conversations. The position that manufacturers seem to uphold is pro-status quo rather than challenging the role of women in the economy. As major employers in the area, this might be problematic: hardly can the population change without a better appreciation of the fact that parental and individual needs cross gender boundaries.

Companies in other sectors seem to be better in terms of women's employment, but hardly can this be related to the active, targeted policies of companies. For instance, Participant 16 recognises that whereas in the past, 'the image of a construction company [was] as being male dominated', as the industry is transforming into a service-like sector with advisors and designers, new opportunities for women to be active are arising. On-site, the problems are the same as for manufacturers: according to participants, women do not want to work in those positions and apply only for on-site assistant positions (P29). Welfare and retail are already sectors which attract many women, both because there are not any negative gender-related associations (quite the contrary) and because their working times coincide with the life-work balance that women appear to seek, such as being back to prepare dinner when employed as cleaners or aids in hospitality (P35).

#### *6.5.1.3 Foreign workers: the hope*

National boundaries are not the limit of companies when looking at the difficulties they face, and companies' propensity in recruiting foreign workers might be yet another potential source of renovation of the economic and social fabric. There is no doubt that foreign workers are becoming more indispensable for manufacturers than before.

The long and expensive procedures required to get access to foreign labour testify of the dire need of such talents. Foreign workers are not readily available in rural areas, as it might happen in cities, but are rather 'imported' from abroad through a series of steps. Companies need to find a government-approved organisation, go abroad, interview the candidates, and help them settle in the locality. No participants described the process as pleasant, but they clearly see some positive sides, such as choosing 'from a large number of people rather than waiting for them to come' (P33) or receiving 'a lot of documents [on the worker's profile]. [Some] things … don't come out in Japan because of privacy, but we received this amazing family history and everything… They conduct an IQ test, English, math …and show us everything' (P24). Although the international labour market is outside the scope of the research, these discriminatory practices obviously do allow a better control of the working population.

The way foreign workers are seen by participants requires, again, a complex answer. There is certainly a degree of diffidence or caution towards accepting foreign workers. Not only do participants remark that the agencies are 'government-approved' (e.g., P24), but they also observe others before making similar choices: 'Our business partners also started accepting foreigners earlier than us. There are many agencies in the city dedicated to Vietnamese and Indian workers, although none in this area' (P33). Such comments are not casual talk, but can be brought back to the harsh criticisms of the trainee system under which foreign workers are brought in Japan. Although several stories of exploitative conditions leading foreign workers to escape from companies have been reported in the news, there is a lingering fear that they might be disruptive of the social order:

> I don't think we are going through any dangerous roads. We have been introduced to the area by a proper organization. ... so far, I haven't had any problems with them going away and disappearing before I knew it... We have a small dormitory where they sleep, but we have not yet heard of any trouble in the neighbourhood or anything like that. The people who came to our company all like Japan, or rather, they have studied Japanese culture very much, and they are much easier to communicate with than Japanese people. […] . I don't know if there are places that hire people who came here illegally, but we haven't had any problems like that. I think we are safe for now (P33).

Once such fears are disproved by experience, expressions of praise were raised, but these too hardly escape multiple interpretations. To be sure, several businesses wished that the local government would support foreign workers through policies for housing and social integration. As in other high-income countries, however, labour shortages are not only a numerical problem, but also a problem of the discrepancy between blue-collar and white-collar jobs, and between the 'rural' and 'urban' productive spheres. Foreign workers are inserted in this context, which frames the positive assessment of their attitudes, life-wise and work-wise, against those of 'the Japanese'. As Participant 28 states, it is not said that foreign workers are hired 'out of necessity', but also to 'manage the company properly'. From the point of view of remuneration, foreign workers are legally entitled to be paid the same or more than the Japanese, as the Japanese Labour Standard Bureau regulates such aspects (P24), and businesses must comply with regulations on the minimum regional and industrial wage (JITCO 2010). This does not mean, as clear from the sums cited, very attractive wages, but the minimum required:

> People from China came here. […] Whether they come to build a company or learn skills, they come here to make money, right? Money is good in Japan, right? When you go back to the Philippines, your girlfriend earns about 20,000 yen [£120] a month. Here, we pay the same salary as that of Japanese people. So, even if you are not good, you'll be earning the equivalent of six or seven months' salary every month [£840]. It's totally different, isn't it? (P34)

Maybe not surprisingly, foreign workers are supplementing those types of jobs for which the Japanese labour force shows no interest, but which, at the moment, seem to be the ones most available in the sites. To the recurring theme that young people are lost to the city, there is added a series of specifications justifying the use of foreign workers. Hence, it is the lack of otherwise

preferable (i.e., Japanese) alternatives which forces companies to recruit abroad, although such practices go against the pillar of life-time employment: 'I'm not sure if [foreign workers] will stay with me for life. Probably not, because it's not for life. In fact, we would be most grateful if local Japanese people would come and work for us [as we wouldn't] need to hire Vietnamese or Indonesian workers (P33). The 'dirty' nature of manual jobs and a putative slackness of the Japanese youth, which are also pointed out by manufacturers not employing foreign workers, are contrasted by the patronising tones and a sense of nostalgia for a past of strong work and family ethic which are present, on the contrary, in the newly arrived, who send more than half of their salary home and whose 'love for family, or the family spirit that says 'I have to do it myself' is even greater than that of the Japanese (P33).

> Japanese people, especially now, don't want to do hard work. In the past, the generation above us, worked very hard during the period of high growth, after the world war. That's how Japan got where it is today. Well, it's the same in all developed countries, isn't it? There are people who went through a lot of hardships, and that is why we have the country we have today. Once you get to a certain point, you don't want to do anything hard. You can live without it. For example, in extreme cases, you can make money by using a mouse while looking at a screen. That's why all the young people are drifting to that side. Especially in the city, in the office, wearing clean clothes, without getting their hands dirty... However, there are people like us who use the land to make food and provide it to others so that we can live. There must be people like us. But there are no Japanese people like them now. That's why more and more people are coming from overseas. […] This is why there are no more places for Japanese to work. Japanese people don't want to work and have a hard time, but people from overseas want to work and come to Japan... The point is that nowadays, we have to rely on people from overseas to work with our bodies. Japanese people have become lazy. That's what I'm talking about. ... People from overseas are willing to do any kind of work, so that's the difference. *I know I shouldn't be saying this*, but people overseas have beautiful hearts. Japanese people tend to think about money or other negative things as soon as you say something, but people overseas have beautiful hearts. The girl from the Philippines always smiles even when she's busy. Japanese people get angry if they are busy. She smiles and asks the Japanese people around her "Why are you guys so angry?" She says, " If I'm busy, I have a job, and I'm happy. That's why people from overseas have more beautiful hearts (P34).

Foreigners are also mentioned outside manufacturing. Companies operating in welfare were just starting to hire foreigners in the localities when fieldwork was undertaken, but under the various economic partnership agreements (EPAs) Japan has signed, such as those with the Philippines, Malaysia, or India, new workers ('trainees') are coming to rural areas in substantial numbers. Although, differently from manufacturers, social welfare corporations are able to attract both I- and U-turners, they still consider foreign workers as their last hope: 'if that doesn't work, we may need to turn away patients. [...] Even though beds are there, there are not enough staff… . It's a vicious circle' (P25). These participants are particularly vocal in their wish that the government would help support these foreign workers to settle down, providing housing (companies will subsidise half of the rent), as they see their role as essentially providing a public good and service. Foreign workers might still have problems in operating in hilly and mountainous areas related to their logistics: if foreign workers are spotted by Japanese because they use bicycles to move around (P19, 28), snow, slopes and inexistent public transportation make it harder for them to go to work, and they choose facilities in more comfortable areas.

When looking at foreign labour in general, individually, businesses might benefit temporarily from the participation of foreign workers to continue their operations as before, and might even show forms of gratitude, but the terms by which they are embedded in the local economy vary. In manufacturing, where most are employed, the terms are those of a sector with intense competition on prices, and their introduction signals more attempts to perpetuate the conditions that first enabled the existence of the industry — cheaper labour in cheaper lands. With that, sustained existing patterns of outmigration might continue, as businesses are not either willing or in the position to make jobs appealing to local workers, especially the young ones. Companies in the welfare sector are more ambiguous, as they operate between public good and private management: salaries were not mentioned, and neither were working conditions, as these companies were just starting to include these workers in their operations. Overall, while foreign workers are only a minority in the two sites, and it is hard to conclude they will dramatically alter the examined local socio-economies in any direction in the short term, it is important to recognise that companies are the main tool through which rural areas will be able to attract foreign workers, as despite the relaxation in recent years, immigration policies are still rigid. While foreign workers might be a source for regenerating rural societies, placing too many hopes on them might be disappointing.

#### *6.5.1.4 Desirable workplaces? Struggling for impact*

Finally, businesses' relation to the socio-economy also runs through the way individual businesses create desirable workplaces, and, eventually, make future workers aware of them. This has been well-recognised in Japan in the context of the revitalisation of the regions. 'Maximising the potential of human capital' has been the flagship of the long Abe administration, which connects the stabilisation of local communities not only to the availability of desirable employers in local socio-economies, but also to the capacity of appealing SMEs to reach potential recruits (JILP 2016). Businesses need not target precise segments of society in order to set up economic and non-economic measures which might make the local socio-economic fabric more appealing, share more of what is generated through the businesses' efforts, and be more competitive in respect to other non-local working environments.

What companies consider as making their workplace a desirable place in the eyes of workers covers essentially four macro aspects, although not all of them were given equal consideration: hiring and recruitment, retention and the relationships with employees, the nature of the job, and, to a lesser extent, training and development. Size matters, and economic types of incentives relating to corporate welfare, standardised human resources practices and clear company policies are only found in larger companies, which have evaluation for progression, bonuses, high

rates of vacation use[60], company trips and facilities and so forth (P20, 33). Welfare corporations also receive regular audits and have institutional pressures to be good employers. 'There is no point in becoming a black company' (P19) with a bad reputation for overworking employees, so companies provide extra benefits for workers, such as more days off or extra health controls ('if you get sick, you will be in trouble. If you get sick, we are all in trouble' (P25)). Only construction companies, and to a lesser extent hospitality for occasional workers, consider monetary incentives as an important way to attract employees, but it should be kept in mind that for these companies it is easier to reflect an increase in wages into higher final prices. WSR have been heavily criticised by some participants for ignoring the fact that many employees, such as in construction, are paid by the hour and have all the incentives to work more to get better pay.

Contrary to these well-defined policies, smaller companies have more fragmented and vague measures, occasionally struggling to articulate what they actually do. Overwhelmingly, it is the non-economic aspect which predominates in the various processes — and this might make it hard for companies to communicate whatever value they believe to have and attract employees, especially from non-local areas. Hiring practices of the past, based on job fairs, magazines and Hello Work ads, are increasingly faltering, and signs of adaptation are scarce. Recruitment appears to be company rather than employee oriented, explaining 'what is it like in our company' and 'whether the person enjoys work' (P24). It might also be left to chance ('It's difficult for new graduates to get to know us, so it would be great if some of them came back to the countryside to work' (P38)), and strategies straightforwardly absent ('There is nothing in particular. […] basically, everybody thinks that they can be patient for some time up to a certain level. So, we just kind of wait and see' (P28)). There is little organised marketing, so that, realistically, any expectations that companies succeed in (partially) reversing outmigration based on their own appeal should be severely re-dimensioned.

There are companies which are indeed very active in bringing new talents to rural areas: again, the case of the company in digital services (P37) is exceptional, holding events in cities to recruit people and financing local activities to get their name out. But this is an exception, not the norm. Importantly, when recruiting outside the local area, factors beyond companies' control might be as, if not more, important than the workplace itself. As in the agricultural sector, the search for independence was a strong motivation leading new people to rural areas, so it is for U- and I-turners in other professional areas. For example, the idea of living in Asago, a place which ranked

[60] Employees in Japan take only 50% of their paid holidays. The sense of guilt of transferring workload to colleagues in understaffed companies, saving holidays for emergency and the fear of appearing lazy are the main three reasons cited (Nikkei Asia 2018). Laws and regulations have been enforced recently to incentivise the use of paid vacation, so that since 2019 employees must take at least 5 days of holidays, and companies failing to demonstrate that this requirement has been satisfied can be fined.

among the best to live in Japan, was identified as a major reason for employees and their families to move there (P25). Subjective and objective ideas of the rural might bypass the power of companies to shape these socio-economies' destiny, and these are not necessarily formed within the locality. In such case, institutions might be better equipped to reinforce the discourse and promote localities.

Of course, it could be argued that the reason companies' recruitment is unsatisfactory, apart from the demographic and locational challenges, is because they do not have any labour-friendly measures or practices at all. Measures to retain employees are effectively often modest in scale and ambition, and this reflects the low margins of action for some companies, who snatch into their answers apologetic statements such as 'I cannot pay that much' (P13) or 'even though the business is not that great' (P30) after reflecting on what they do for their employees. High rates of retention in rural areas might also account for the little need to do something: the consensus is that people do not leave their jobs easily, and so a lack of incentives might play a role in why companies do not take clear, active resolutions. For instance, a larger company recognised that new graduates hired nationwide tend to leave more often than locals, and hence that constraints to mobility and other factors related to the relationship between the individual and the locality have a role to play. And, indeed, the two can also overlap or be less perceived problems (as in family businesses).

That said, there are in the sample some interesting cases showing how the employer-employee relationship can be strengthened through non-economic forms. Ignoring routine meetings, parties, and career development (which might create certain working atmospheres that involve employees' participation leveraging on control, inclusion, or ambition), few companies have rounder philosophies on the relationship between employer and employees. Participant 28's 'culture of failure' makes the company stand out from Japanese companies, accused of not managing people 'in a humane way': 'Anyone can do this [job]. It may take some time and you may not progress beyond a certain level of skill. […But] everyone has their place, and everyone has a different way of working'. Hence, the individual conditions of workers, their capacities, are valued by acknowledging that people are different and that it is up to the management to foster diverse talents as equals. Such disposition is posited to help workers feel appreciated, a source of motivation to stay. Rather differently, Participant 12's philosophy is based on the principle 'The owner is an employee'. The company premises themselves remind of a church *refettorio*, with long communal tables and slogans pending from the walls. The participant describes that the key to the company's success and its high retention rate is in the care towards employees in everyday life. As in other companies, the family and health needs of employees are prioritised and organised by scheduling among members, while communal activities such as cooking together,

bringing lunch to those who are working on site, or running marathons foster the sense of belonging to the group. Finally, Participant 37's company was founded on the premise of revitalisation through employment creation, and similarly offers a wide range of activities for employees, employees' families, and citizens ('community') sponsored by the company [61]. Although it is not possible because of the type of sample to know how much these measures are effective and appreciated, and although the material conditions and rewards of employees are unaltered — which, it cannot be emphasised enough, are important issues for citizens in rural areas — they might balance or compensate for the loss in the economic exchange if compared to urban areas.

#### *6.5.1.5 The nature of jobs: a discomforting picture*

It is possible to look at the nature of the jobs and ask how much it accounts for attracting and keeping employees to the workplace. Do companies think they offer attractive jobs? The general impression is: not really. For some manufacturers (except the larger ones) not only do people not really enjoy some jobs but the type of people looking for jobs does not match the employer's profiles, with the employer responsible to discover what the employee is like and likes (P20). Local people have, for instance, been portrayed as lacking autonomous thinking:

> I wouldn't say [that people want to come here to work]. People who come to the interview want to do simple jobs. They want to work on the belt conveyor, attaching things all the time. That kind of persons comes, but [the work here] is different. There are only 5 people, so you have to do everything by yourself. […] However, if you get results, your salary will increase obviously, as will your bonus. Those with motivation grow. But those who don't want to think, those who want to just do something without thought, they don't fit. […] There are many people like this, especially in Yabu. [...] It's a problem of the job market and the job itself. First, there is my problem. I want people with this kind of thinking. I want to have both responsibility and results, not just simple workers… However, they don't come so easily. And the other is that in Yabu, there is no one who is so motivated and has guts. Only a handful of those people exist (P8).

A good job is often described in terms of motivation of the employee, who 'must find it rewarding, and enjoy it' (ibid.). Such is the self-described 'lucky' case of Participant 17, where 'many people… are conscious of making good things' despite night hours and tough working conditions or Participant 20, where employees take pride that 'the parts and products that we make are riding on ...dozens of kinds of cars in the world'. Companies in other sectors too remark that something other than monetary gains drives workers. In the healthcare sector, where there is a possibility of career continuity for returnees or new incomers, there is an expectation that caring work is 'about passion' (P19):

> Nursing care is taking care of other people's diapers. You have to take care of the excrements. […] It's not a beautiful job.[…] You have to have a feeling…. As I said before, we are taking care of our seniors, who in life, at

[61] To be clear, many companies are continuously connected to the local environment, sponsoring and organising events such as car races, golf clubs, parks, donating to schools and so forth. Although these are usually considered contributions in the literature, they are not in the research. For a 'contribution' to be made, it needs to be a constant flow, allowing the perpetuation of the socio-economy. Contribution is not, as sometimes it appears, a nice thing made by the individual.

> 80 or 90, crossed the stormy seas. We are here to serve, and we have to have it in our hearts, right? It's not a job that can be done just because … money or benefits are good.

It would be tempting to say that providing a professional or specialised type of job is by itself an incentive for workers to stay or go to a certain workplace, but this would not reflect the experience of all participants. There are differences between professions, depending also on how industries are structured. While companies needing trained and certificated workers tie salary increases to the level achieved, only for some does it work to keep the employee to the workplace. Hence, one thing is to specialise in funeral ceremonies, where a solo career is difficult, and another is to do so for electrical and other construction works, 'one of the industries that can easily be independently operated' because of the low capital investments (P7). For example, Participant 29 expresses frustration over its incapacity to motivate workers to endure the efforts needed to qualify or remain after:

> So, the question is, where can [employees] find fulfilment? I think we need to teach and guide them to find it. […] That's how I've been doing it myself. I started out as an electrician with a minimum wage when I had a wife and two or three kids... At that time, I never thought that the salary was low. It was more about the satisfaction of working towards what I wanted to do. I think the most important thing is the sense of accomplishment you get when you finish a job. So, I don't think that you should quit or not quit just because of the benefits, whether the work style has been reformed or how the hours have been reduced.

Hence, despite many hopes that private economic agents will carry out substantial improvements sufficient to revitalise the rural socio-economies, it is evident that acting on rural resilience through this channel might lead to unsatisfactory results. The socio-economy appears in dire need to be renovated also through the injection of new activities, which would make these economies more aligned with the contemporary requirements of the economy.

### 6.5.2 Companies as enablers: linkages with agriculture

Reaching the final points, as it was the case for agriculture, the formal employer-employee-workplace relation finds its expression in (extended) family labour, occasional workers, and trainees in smaller companies, so that maintaining or improving people's own life standards and lifestyle is a major area where companies return to the local socio-economy part of its vigour and capacity to self-renovate. Making up for the uncertainty of salaries or the lack of holidays through the search for a reasonable work-life balance and autonomy, as well as the recognition of the limits of small companies in terms of employment, are points similar to those already described for agriculture, and, for conciseness and because no substantial new observation would be provided, will not be repeated.

Rather, a more interesting last point is how companies involved in food supply chains tend to see their major contributions as being external to the company rather than internal to them. Although these companies are 'standard' employers, just like other smaller companies in the agricultural sector they consider their way of giving back to the locality as being complementary to farmers

and agricultural producers by directly allowing their reproduction, in a scheme where 'each [company] does its job' (P21). In so doing, they also indirectly appropriated part of the wider benefits of agricultural activities, such as flood management or food safety, as it was an extension of their own operations. Hirschman's concept of linkages and economic growth comes readily at hand: just as he posited that the interdependence between sectors could be leveraged to foster domestic development for developing countries, in the context of the countryside related industries become co-constituted if they can grow symbiotically. This is in essence what participants, especially food manufacturers, see as their role, and what the Japanese notion of sixth industrialisation incarnates. '[Ours] is a company trying to do [the sixth industrialisation]', said Participant 17, 'Tajima's fishery is very poor… . […] Rather than going into the fishing industry or agriculture, we would like to support the farmers and fishermen, and create something unique and independent'. Interdependence mostly takes the form of purchasing 'local' products (where local can mean the municipality, the Tajima region, or the entire prefecture) as raw input materials and turning them into a finished, exportable product or, as in the case of retailers, providing platforms for sales, rather than the alternative form whereby farmers introduce degrees processing and sales in their businesses, as it was the case of Participant 5 in agriculture and Participant 34.

Problems related to conflicting mentalities might arise between farmers and non-local, child companies, and this might highlight how the institutional context of reference might incentivise conflicts between manufacturers and farmers. Although interdependent, manufacturers and farmers react to different stimuli. Hence, when Participant 32 started its project of rural revitalisation in an old school, the company used to rely on local farmers while also engaging in agricultural production with its own employees. But they gave up part of local co-production after a natural calamity left the rice fields full of residues. As a protected sector, farmers insisted on using the compensation provided by the government, and avoiding harvest for the year. As a non-protected sector, however, the participant used 20 employees to rescue the rice and stop the collaboration: 'Why is that? The reason is that it is light-hearted to quit when it is earth and sand. […] We manufacturers don't do that because there is the supplier responsibility'.

### 6.5.3 Other ways in which companies shape the rural

Capitalist economies have ingrained the belief that growth will lead to greater social dividends. Indeed, in conjunction to providing employment, companies frame their major responsibility towards the locality as that of growing and surviving, a finding spread evenly across the sample. A lot of hopes have been put in technological solutions for the ageing society, taking for granted that demographic changes constitute a sufficient push for companies to innovate.

***The responsibility of companies: capital as the basis for employment***

In the heterogeneous sample too sectors and size are meaningful although insufficient points of reference framing companies' actions and beliefs. Participants in capital intensive sectors, and most significantly manufacturing, are the only ones which both consider and adopt automation and advanced forms of mechanisation, and hence the main actors of these paragraphs. Acquisitions and purchases are proper calendar events, so that companies' histories are often described in terms of technological evolution. By the metric of the time and length spent in explaining their innovative processes and machineries, it is evident that these Japanese companies are very proud of their technologies, which constitute part of their identities, modus operandi, and normality: 'Every year, increasing machineries. We add new machines every year and we do things other companies cannot imitate. … I've become desensitised to whether or not it's something special' (P33).

Contrary to corporate companies in the agricultural sector, outside light industries, it is not the problem of labour availability or costs but competitiveness which imposes attention towards investments in capital. A counterpoint against the exclusive or excessive focus on local, internal dynamics when attributing rural features to places or behaviours is the extent to which companies are subject to rationales and pressures beyond the locality (Hoggart and Paniagua 2001). These forces emanating from the outside might constitute substantial limits to the agency of participants, and their reflexivity might be shadowed simply because, in order to establish a relationship between place and company, there is a strong need of intermediation from capital. For national and international suppliers of mass products, the participants' gaze is set on faraway markets which dictate the pace of change of rural production: 'the competition … is getting fierce, so automakers are constantly developing new …systems...[W]e keep up with it, but the speed of tracking is increasing considerably compared to the past' (P20). There is ample evidence that technological innovation *primarily* serves the aim of guaranteeing survival by raising productivity, so that, indirectly, it is a *conditio sine qua non* for employment and the same premise for the enlargement of opportunities. Changes in labour following technological upgrades appear to be perceived as consequences of the vital needs of expanding operations, speeding up processes, efficiency and adding new lines. For the moment, then, investments in capital complement labour, and, with few exceptions, only marginal attention is paid to replacing workers.

This fact is important if related to the experiences of corporate agricultural producers. The sense of urgency and the precariousness of work is not as pronounced as in agriculture. Several participants in manufacturing believe that their responsibility is to overcome the vulnerability of jobs in rural areas while generating revenues, without too much philosophy or grandiosity:

> I don't want to do anything that will narrow down the options for people to go to Kobe or Osaka. If we work hard and pay a lot of taxes, there will definitely be more jobs and places to work…. That is what I am trying to do. That's why, even after I'm done with work and the kids are out of the way, I still want to work with that sense of purpose until I die. […] There are only a few places to work, and they seem to be vulnerable (P33).

Despite the limits on the quality of work and its desirability, the idea behind participants' accounts is what can be called as a push towards 'intergenerational employment', which emphasises stability as a quality and relies on the continuous adaptation and renovation of capital. These jobs might not be ideal, but their availability is more reliable compared to the prospects of the fields (if considering the intentions). Again, this is not a surprising finding, but it has to be remarked because, if the idea is to generate employment without specification of any kind, all participants must be held to the same standards. If comparing benefits to workers and local people, it is hard to see, from the perspective of participants, anything substantially better in agricultural employment, or at least a reason to discard the potential of companies operating in other sectors in making rural resilience.

Make no mistake, however, that participants are not interested in the potential of automation and mechanisation also from a labour perspective, as they show full awareness of the consequences that rounds of technological innovation have on their workers, and how these interact to alleviate demographic challenges. These are concomitant efforts to increase productivity, enacted by participants. Even if ignoring for brevity all types of investments related to changes in products, such as those to reduce the amount of input materials or to guarantee certain product characteristics (commonly cited by participants in light industries), it is evident from participants' accounts that there is not an intrinsically bad or good direction dictated by changes in labour-capital relations. Participants estimate the effects, calculating them on the table (P38). For instance, automation has aided Participant 33 to shorten working hours, something which was intentionally sought after as part of a work-life balance agenda, while for Participant 34 mechanisation steps in to transform 'the work so that even the elderly can do it'[62]. In contrast, Participant 15 does not hesitate to admit the aim of reducing manpower as much as possible, decanting how the industry has evolved so that '15 years ago, one operator could control three machines, while now, one operator can control up to eight'. Hence, although operating within a productivist frame, these participants have margins for orienting their decisions. The consensus is, however, that they will more purposefully target labour-saving technologies if their recruitment strategies fail. Considering the challenges faced by these companies , this scenario is of considerable relevance.

[62] Participant 25 mentions that machineries for heavy lifting have become mandatory in nursing care homes to protect both workers and patients. Double standards exist between industries for tasks involving similar body efforts, where companies not exposed to stricter controls by authorities have more discretion than those closely related to the public in questions related to workers' wellbeing.

***The absence of social concerns in technology-adoption and the rural techno-future***

Moreover, participants are not excluding technologies based on a particular stance of socio-political nature. When applicable (hence excluding traditional production, as for P21), few partially ruled out non-human work because of social concerns. Participant 32 is such a case, whereby there is no wish to speed up the introduction of automation because ' if I do it too much, I won't need people anymore', and this both contravenes the reasons the manager was firstly sent to the area (to create a rural revitalisation business model) as well as impedes the process of learning for employees. But, asked when the time for more automation would be ripe, the limits of the locality appear as obstacles:

> Well, there is no need for business to be big. Now, we make 200 million (£1.3 million) out of the headquarters 40 billion (£267 millions). Using this facility at the fullest capacity, sales can be 300-400 million, that's the limit. So, if you make a model that can steadily make about 300 million and 350 million, it is all right here. If you do the next business, you go elsewhere using this package. So, I have no intention of making a billion dollars or anything like that here. Or rather, I can't (P32).

Practical obstacles are the major reasons for not proceeding with investments in automation or further mechanisation. Some participants believe they have reached the limits in their actual sites, and the question is not whether to invest more in one specific type of capital, but investing in all of them simultaneously: to grow more or not? And where? Other limits include the nature of tasks or phases of production, costs, and flows of information, and industrial requirements (e.g., in nursing care homes, the number of workers is calculated based on the number of patients).

Finally, just as it was seen for some agricultural producers, in rare instances widespread automation is linked to the techno-future of the countryside, so that for 'simple tasks [such as reception, robots will replace] almost all those positions... We won't need people. It will be just rationalization' (P24). In this ideal world, the removal of the function of some jobs as a premise for the continuation of a socio-economy is accepted as part of the necessary evolution of localities, conflating the possibility to substitute human work with the actual willingness and capacity of people to do so.

This technologically based vision of the rural future looks extreme in scope when compared to the accounts of those who actually operate in the field. Even basic self-checkouts were gently opted out by Participant 27, who did not see any reasons to replace the high standards of Japanese customer service with an anonymous machine, proposing instead card payments as an ongoing innovation[63]. The accounts on investments in capital of participants in hospitality are also very far from considering robots: fixing buildings and buying furniture, new software for management,

[63] The days of fieldwork surely support the view of Japanese local areas as 'cardless' rather than 'cashless' microcosms. This is not, however, a rural feature, as small businesses in Japan tend to prefer cash payments and alternative options might not be available. In rural areas, it is just more difficult to withdraw money, as there are not many ATMs outside convenience stores or the post office.

marketing efforts and so forth. Some businesses, such as private gyms, already make use of basic technologies such as cards to access facilities independently, to operate with minimum help from others (P22). Clearly, one should doubt why these participants, who mostly run family businesses, would be prone to lose their employment and their strength, recalling that 'being different' is what allows them to survive big competitors, or why they should even continue having a business if they do not have sufficient (family) labour when they enter the old age. Who is expected then to introduce such technologies is unclear. Would new entrants be needed, bringing different motivations and financial capacities? Are these not the same premises justifying state intervention in agriculture — a 'weak' existing base of small businesses being 'inefficient' but unable to self-transform in an expansionary fashion? Are these companies and participants, who modestly mention providing safety and 'peace of mind to families' (P19), a sense of security 'rooted in the area' (P35), and familiarity as their responsibilities towards rural revitalisation, less important socially because of their limited economic revenues, in a country where the Minister of Regional Revitalisation and of Measures for the Declining Birthrate is also the Minister of Measures for Loneliness and Isolation and in places where occasions for human contacts might be fewer than in denser areas? Again, these are questions which, although speculative today, might present themselves in the future. With the new affordances that technologies might offer, the issues for whom the economy works will still be there, especially so for rural socio-economies.

## 6.6 Recap of the findings

Outside state intervention, the rural appears messier, more complex, less rationalisable. The chapter has shown what endorsing a limited definition of the rural might imply. It might mean overlooking the general state of decline, ignoring the importance of diversity for the quality of jobs produced, and asking if it is really possible to change it without touching the overall configuration and even industrial structure of these places; it means that maybe policies to support the rural should not be targeting the economic fabric through companies, but rather through support for the individual. If the state believes that a WSR might become self-implementing because of the struggle of companies facing tight labour markets, or if thinking that few labour recommendations such as reducing working hours or encouraging women inclusion might bring any change to these socio-economies, the role of the state in building rural resilience might be extremely small, if existent.

The findings helped reveal how agriculture is part of an entire set of relationships, involving the social and physical environment, which have interacted with wider movements in the political economy to make Yabu and Asago what they are today. These spaces are multi-layered and stratified.

Importantly, looking at the experiences of a variety of participants allows to see other emerging characteristics of the locality, less concerned about the material resources of the rural. For instance, a sensitiveness to the good attributes of the rural, made of tropes often heard in the literature such as genuine relationships, beautiful nature, and so forth, appears not only in those participants who operate fully exposed to the locality, but also in those who try to connect their idea of rurality to places. However, ideas on rurality based on relationships are not always unambiguous, serving to reproduce old expectations of subservient behaviour from employees. Such diversity of interpretations is important when thinking in terms of resilience: it means that rural socio-economies can count on a multiplicity of factors to attract people and businesses, although not all of them are particularly desirable.

Demographic changes too are seen with different eyes, as an integral part of the locality. Some participants believe they can survive only in these environments. Participants think that rural socio-economies are economies that cannot compete with urban areas based on salaries or working conditions, but rather need to live small, complementing lives with what agriculture has also provided, a way to supplement income. They also think changes in attitudes will be needed to overcome the sense of inferiority of rural life.

Finally, although few participants feel they can do more than what they are doing individually for rural resilience, looking at the heterogeneous sample means getting a better insight on rural work and its potential to revitalise the rural. Changes in the employer-employee relationship due to the changing circumstances appear limited. Despite the fact that most measures introduced by participants recall the WRS agenda, the quality of changes seems overwhelmingly dictated by the necessity of work, rather than by appreciation or the full embracing of new working styles. Ageing workers appear to have been embedded in the local ecosystems for decades, while the nature of work, prejudices on jobs and the gendered nature of housework make rural employment a challenging environment for women. Foreign workers are deemed a new important source for the continuation of the local socio-economies, but the way they are integrated shows the weaknesses of the employment market, with its uncompetitive salaries and positions largely undesirable in the eyes of the Japanese youth. What it seems is that some participants are better positioned to bring rural resilience through the employer-employee relationship and through management practices, and a new generation of entrepreneurs is aware that new working styles should enter the rural environment too. Nonetheless, these efforts are scattered and unorganised.

# 7. Discussion and Conclusion: Making Rural Resilience

The study set out with the aim of answering two research questions: To what extent can the state shape rural resilience? And to what extent can private economic agents shape rural resilience? If the capacities of state and that of private economic agents were divided to favour analysis in the corpus of the thesis (see: Figure 8, 'Research Map', p. 80) in the concluding chapter the attempt is to interpret the findings contained in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, informed by the literature and the context, in a more holistic way to encourage the understanding of the meaning, implications, and significance of the entire study (Yin 2016).

In particular, the chapter proceeds with a multidimensional logic with the intention 'to focus on how different dimensions and scales of social existence intersect or relate, [and to] explore, rather than feel inconvenienced by, how it is that what we might think of as primarily micro or macro domains are shifting and fluid categories, and are in perpetual interplay' (Mason 2006a, 15). In the research, two approaches to the rural were adopted, the relational rural, based on Halfacree's works (1993, 2006) and inspired by Lefebvre, and the rural as a locality (Newby 1986; Hoggart and Paniagua 2001; Hoggart 1990). The way rural resilience should be achieved varies depending on the perspective taken but, in the materiality of the sites, in Yabu and in Asago, the two overlap and are undistinguished. Moreover, the capacities of state and private economic agents interact. Rural resilience is made contemporaneously through policies, understandings, and behaviours (or absence thereof), which are not mutually exclusive. Just as the state does not shape the rural, and even less rural resilience, in a single, linear way, but rather, in multiple, fractured ways, private economic agents, constrained and enabled in their actions and choices by forces within and beyond the locality, similarly exercise their capacities to build rural resilience in various directions.

The two following sections discuss how private economic agents and state shape rural socio-economies and are organised according to the perspective of the rural adopted. Each section considers both the limitations of the study and some possible directions for future investigation. Finally, some reflections on rural resilience are advanced.

## 7.1 How state and private economic agents shape rural resilience: the perspective of the relational rural

The first way in which **the state can shape the rural is through targeted spatial policies**. The state can make the 'rural' actively and purposefully, and hence generalisations on the rural are made possible and have real consequences despite the concept being 'meaningful but useless' (Dymitrow and Brauer 2018). Abstractions can be generated and reproduced without being *fully*

dependent on the actual socio-economic realities, so that the rural as a representation of space, what Halfacree (2006) referred to as the formal representation of the rural, can become a powerful source influencing the destiny of the *collectivity* of rural socio-economies. This is a capacity which clearly distinguishes states from private economic agents, expressed through the process of idealisation-concretisation-idealisation (or generalisation-particularisation-generalisation) that the study first identified and then presented through the analysis of the JRS and the formation of the NSSZs.

In the literature review, it was seen that the rural is a slippery concept, especially hard to be defined due to the fact that today's local socio-economies hardly fit into a single pattern of development. Policymakers, confronted with choices, can display degrees of sensitivity as to how to approach societies in territories. Nonetheless, as much diversity there might actually be among rural socio-economies and the multifunctionality of rural areas, **agriculture still functions as the lens through which the Japanese state interprets and creates a 'rural' collective**, a finding which echoes that of previous works (Ashwood and Bell 2016; Bell 2007; Lobao and Meyer 2004; Bonnen 1992). In Japan too, the agricultural sector monopolises policy resources and attention in rural policy making.

It is indeed true, as Lowe and colleagues have argued (1995), that the trajectories of rural development and agencies' strategies must be distinguished, and it is similarly important to recognise that localities have their own specificities and requirements. But such valuable discernment cannot be meant to signify ignoring how agencies' strategies influence the trajectories of places, unevenly yet simultaneously. Agencies' strategies matter for how programmes are designed, what they are really meant to achieve. If one looks only at the locality, the state's capacity to influence resilience might seem limited. However, the evaluation of the state's programme should not be taken, as it is often done, as having impact only on the socio-economies where its vision physically concretises. **The actions of the state accumulate towards a new relationship between state and rural socio-economies which is characterised by absence and engaging-to-disengage — and the changing nature of this relationship is what matters for rural resilience and reaches places which have little to do with the particular intervention in Yabu or share close to nothing of Yabu's socio-economic configuration**.

From the analysis of the JRS, what emerged is that the rural is portrayed through problematic relationships of the past, because of an agriculture which both fails to live up to its potential but is proposed as a panacea for rural problems. And it is the former element of these ways to characterise rural socio-economies, the redefinition of the problematic relationships of the past, that seems to be of utmost priority, the other being means to ends. The Japanese state's

interpretation of the collective rural as agricultural productive sites and societies needs to be framed through a historical relationship which is fading, but that for long used to be pervasive. The relationship which is touched upon through the NSSZ is not the state's relationship with Yabu, but with the whole socio-economies joined through the political and economic institutions of the agrarian economy. Political economists and sociologists in the New Rural Sociology agenda (Newby 1983; Buttel and Newby 1980) were aware that politics and economics intertwine in the making of places. Although today the problem of agriculture is portrayed as an essentially economic problem (Brady 2021), keeping the small family farm in Japan has mainly been a matter of politics for decades (Byres 1986; Bernstein 1996), and this form of production has represented the organised side of the rural, able to attract resources later redistributed to the whole locality. **The agricultural system has been the strongest link connecting otherwise dispersed and diverse socio-economies — the interface between people and states**.

In the case of Japan, as depopulation and economic crises hit, the state has proceeded to 'engage-to-disengage', to intervene in order to *decrease* its presence in rural affairs. **Facilitating the reproduction of individual socio-economies in the future seems a desirable aim, but secondary to the state's strategy to diminish its role in the economy**. As Cloke and Little (1990) remarked, policies should not be taken at face value, to be meant to achieve only the objectives they declare, and the case explored in the research definitely pays tributes to this observation. The NSSZ and agricultural reforms might be *portrayed* as instruments to build revitalisation in the JRS, but, in reality, it seems that **the NSSZ in Yabu is better understood as a small political case to justify a larger political case of disengagement from rural areas, supported through the gradual introduction of a fully capitalist agriculture** (more intensive, productive, profitable). Yabu incarnates the attempt to concretise on the ground a state's project, whose purpose is to utilise the mechanisms of the NSSZs to facilitate acceptance of otherwise opposed reforms, epitomised by the use of the adjective 'bedrock-like' regulations to indicate the presence of stubborn interests (Hatta 2013). **Rather than being a case of revitalisation, Yabu seems more a case of the state's withdrawal from difficult relationships which were forged in the past**.

**If accepting that revitalisation is only a side-aim, welcome but not sought after, the way the intervention was conceived and implemented is reasonable from the state's perspective.** Differently said, agencies' strategies matter for the formulation of actions. One of the possible explanations why the policy measures found in the NSSZ in Yabu seem so out of touch and disconnected from the reality of the local socio-economies under investigation is that hilly and mountainous areas were not the initial targets to begin with, and, being a small place, a nowhere of agricultural production, and a serious case of depopulation, Yabu seems an innocuous place to

implement reforms (i.e., what bad could it do to try). Many signs supporting this statement were identified embedded in the design of the NSSZs as laboratories for policy innovation and models that must be relevant examples *for the country*. Arguably, if the state wanted to make a case for the revitalisation of agriculture in remote, hilly and mountainous areas, transformative efforts of the existing fabric would have a more widespread effect. And, in turn, this would imply that the state's priority would have been directed towards the well-being of localities.

Instead, the state chose a reform package clearly favouring new, large players with substantial capital availability. Through this experiment in social engineering, the state tried to incentivise or introduce new productive and management practices in the countryside and effectively speed up the exit of small farmers from the market to release part of its links (and duties) to the rural. Hence, the present study raises the possibility that, in the overall balance of things, the revitalisation of rural socio-economies is not among the most important goals for the state, although this round of regulation will participate to shape the rural in the future, as a step towards the disengagement of the state from territories. **The state is not actively trying to build a dialogue with territorially bounded socio-economies, but rather pursuing an agenda which affects but does not consider their needs.**

As a matter of fact, and as the research shows through its use of the REF (Section 3.2.2 and 3.3.2.3), the extent to which the state can shape the individual, rural socio-economy (and even less its resilience) is extremely meagre. **Facilitating the introduction of new management and productive practices, such as corporate management and an industrial, capital-intensive, and highly mechanised agriculture, is another way through which the state can shape rural resilience**. From the perspective of Halfacree's (2006) three-fold architecture of the rural, what is observed is the way in which spatial practices are created, and where the lives and understanding of the rural of private economic agents, the participants in the study, encounter space as conceived by the state. Be it to alter the relationship between the state and rural areas, or to use agriculture as a way to revitalise rural socio-economies, as posited by Pawson and Tilley (2004), the NSSZ measures have to be digested by those who are the channels of change to be effective. Hence, this way of creating rural resilience can only be understood on the ground, through the experiences of agricultural producers who should be the main beneficiaries of the NSSZ measures. Results from fieldwork in Yabu and Asago suggest that the **realisation of the state agenda for an aggressive agriculture might encounter consistent challenges and nodes of conflicts in hilly and mountainous areas**, and that local administrations might need to seriously consider what exactly they want to achieve through agriculture, and what rural revitalisation means to them. Just as Lefebvre had described, in the process where abstract space tries to conquer concrete space, there will be resistance (Wilson 2013).

A combination of findings provides support for this statement. Firstly, the programme of the NSSZ overall fails to capture the most salient issues of producers. If the local fabric is made of small producers, the findings insinuate that they overwhelmingly suffer from problems of demand and distribution, not production. However, all the measures in the NSSZ emphasise the supply side of agricultural production. Secondly and relatedly, the programme's emphasis on the entry of external parties in agricultural activities ignores forms of amelioration of existing producers. In Yabu, such bias could be seen from how participants reported the benefits of the NSSZ. New companies investing in agriculture and endowed with substantial capital were more positive and better able to articulate their achievements through the NSSZs. Moreover, Yabu was a frontrunner under the spotlight as a national case and hence successfully recruited a handful of companies when launching the programme, although failing to attract more after the first couple of years. Thinking horizontally, other rural localities might encounter different experiences because the context itself will change outside the attention of the public eye and pressures to deliver. An aggressive agriculture requires funds which might be hardly available in economically weak localities, and the risk is that local administrations, in order to attract new capital, might compete among each other by selling off or undervaluing their public resources. The biggest instance of this process of devaluation of rural resources is seen in land, which is increasingly treated as a commodity by local administrations, something worthless and which can be given away. The mentality is that any use is better than no use. As participants recognised, however, a race to the bottom type of competition might induce situations of moral hazard, whereby those who show interest in accessing land do so because the risks are low or inexistent and no bad consequences would follow.

Always connected to land is the third point which poses challenges to the assumptions of the Yabu model. One of the most important ways state intervention seems to lack connection with the reality of some rural areas is that it posits that companies have problems in acquiring land, and this is what impedes the full-fledged realisation of a successful agriculture. This seems only partially true. Measures for land mobilisation are appreciated by non-local players because they do not have access to the network of relationships to obtain farmland. Farmland banks have also been recognised as extremely comfortable to use. For existing players, property rights at the local level have been more mobile than they appear on paper, and gaining access to (cheap) land is not hard. Buying agricultural land was seen by participants as a favour to the local administration and a gesture of commitment to the community, not an investment. The economics behind agricultural land, its low price, makes it a burden and favours its treatment as a disposable good also by companies. Hence, although agriculture in Japan might present many issues related to the small size of land plots, in hilly and mountainous areas further attempts to mobilise and

commodify land might bring very moderate economic outcomes — flexible access to land exists, and the issue is still how to attract people to invest in the countryside.

Fourthly, local administrations should expect conflicts of vision between different agricultural producers which might require mediation and whose resolution might influence how successful future cooperation and co-existence of modes of farming will be (McGreevy 2012). Arguably one of the major problems with the NSSZ is that the state places too much weight on the economic aspects of agriculture and unfair expectations on what these producers should do or become to be recognised as participating in the economy. As much as the state promotes the idea of rural areas as agricultural productive sites, it is reductive to think that agriculture is lived and practised in only one form or for only one reason. In Japan, there is a strong tradition of communal care of agricultural infrastructure, and new companies (not necessarily non-local) might struggle to understand how to relate to their neighbours. Farmers, small companies and corporate companies had different ideas on what agriculture was about, vowing to the nuances of agricultural production as an activity characterised by completely different practices and hybrid forms (Hisano, Akitsu, and McGreevy 2018). These fields are the spaces of representations of participants, where they see their homes, their families, their businesses, and their lives fully unfolding.

Agriculture can be a feasible economic activity in hilly and mountainous areas and needs not to be highly profitable to be a fundamental part of rural socio-economies. Participants' own assessment of Yabu and Asago, based almost exclusively on the fit between the features of the locality and the product, was that these are not places where it is convenient to practise agriculture, especially large scale. Nonetheless, agricultural producers engage with localities and agriculture for different motivations: the fact that production is not easy does not impede them to find ways to make do if they have other motives. As noted by Halfacree (2006), the lived experiences of the rural, the links that people form in space and through space, make it limited to recognise only one type of relationship as playing out in the making of the rural through agriculture. Social relationships between people bounded to a certain space have proved through the years to be a consistent source of rejuvenation of the countryside (McGreevy, Kobayashi, and Tanaka 2018). **Economic thinking neglects, and potentially suppresses, the importance of human bonds or the fact that coming back to the countryside or starting or continuing a business are ways for people to find compromises with other life needs**: taking care of parents, relatives, properties, escaping the stress of work by giving up on economic gains, being independent and feeling free. There are surely several cases among participants' histories in which the economic system serves the social system and the individual's needs.

A last area that should be considered is employment and working practices, and whether agricultural producers can bring about a consistent boost to rural revitalisation as defined in the research in terms of capacity to alleviate the negative consequences of demographic changes (see: Section 2.2.1). The findings to this extent largely confirm what is already known (Lobao and Meyer 2004; Ashwood and Bell 2016). **Even if a competitive agriculture was created, the rural ecosystem might still decline, as agriculture is not able to attract or absorb consistent flows of people**. Concentrating productive abilities does not necessarily benefit people. Only corporate agricultural producers are employers and thus have more potential to distribute to the local area directly by providing attractive work and even by recruiting outside the area, but these participants reported struggles in recruitment, are increasingly interested in automation, and provide vulnerable jobs. The Japanese youth might be interested in agriculture, but as managers or self-employed. What participants looked for was a sense of gratification, although acknowledging all the negative sides of working in agriculture such as the lack of holidays or a stable income. The rest of the agricultural producers do not employ in any significant number, and hence participants' role in rural resilience has little to do with work. Nonetheless, the way participants' shape rural resilience is by their ability to foster the new generation of farmers as trainees, and continue the operations of agriculture as a largely independent business, where values other than profit cross with economic rationality. Although the state might not be actively targeting small but profitable businesses, it is still indirectly creating the conditions for future struggles of this segment of the economic fabric.

All considered, however, it should be remarked that it is not only that the reforms proposed by the state for revitalisation have no major positive outcomes, but that agriculture is a really difficult sector on which to base revitalisation. If localities without a competitive advantage in agricultural production want to create a strategy of revitalisation based on agriculture, they should be ready to embrace the fact that it is among the hardest ways to consolidate their populations, at least in the short term. As a standalone strategy and under the current circumstances, the results might be insufficient for the future reproduction of these socio-economies. The beauty of agriculture for our lives, the enrichment humans might witness when in contact with plants and animals and the natural system, might not be enough to support lives in societies bred to consume and spend way more than the strictly necessary.

## 7.2 How state and private economic agents shape rural resilience: the perspective from the rural as a locality

Just as posited in the locality and rural restructuring thread of the literature (see: Section 1.2.3.2), a second way in which **the state shapes the rural and rural resilience** is not through spatial policy, but rather, **by changing the core assumptions of how the political economy works**.

Recalling concepts from the literature review, policies affecting localities can be scattered (Saraceno 2013), and waves of restructuring might be derived from changes in the wider political economy environment.

**The research confirms the importance of mutating governing philosophies for rural socio-economies' future**. This is especially true when looking at the new emerging role of SMES in Japan (see: Section 2.2.2). If previous state support for SMEs prescinded from their performance and aimed at mitigating the differences in the capacities of firms, the expectations held on private economic agents have changed, Consistently with studies noting the differentiated effects of the retrenchment of the state on localities (Young 2016; Bock 2019; Tonts and Horsley 2019), the Japanese state is shifting the burden of resilience on private economic agents with the belief that tight labour markets will lead to competition, and this fight for labour will be a natural source of innovation for the local economic fabric (see: Section 2.2). Rather than being supported by the state, SMEs have now to support the local socio-economies. There is a strong assumption by policy makers that private economic agents will have the awareness, willingness, and capacity to bring change towards what is collectively desirable for society by changing work — although little is being done to change the environment in which SMEs operate.

When approaching the overarching questions using the approach of the rural as a locality and within the parameters and scope of this study, what appears is that the ways private economic agents are linked to the locality might make this vision simplistic. **As the state in Japan is relying on the strength of the private sector to deliver its project of revitalisation, the capacities of the state and that of private economic agents manifest as one,** and so the capacity of the state to deliver resilience emerges itself as weak. When the state promotes the idea that the challenges deriving from demographic changes should be solved through the economic system, and especially by rethinking work, it does not consider the history and complexity of places, the variety of structures making the local ecosystems, even maybe wrongfully supposing that competition is everywhere or of a single type. Nonetheless, **companies might lack the breathing space to alter their own conditions of survival or the willingness to take actions, and, subsequently, fall short of the ability to bring (additional, positive) changes** to the socio-economies which host them. **Private economic agents cannot change by themselves what surrounds them, especially in the short term and with the urgency required: states, although with limitations, are better equipped to initiate structural transformations.**

The research has brought forward a number of reasons supporting the difficulties of agents to change their socio-economies by introducing new management practises through fieldwork in the case of the two localities under investigation. Firstly, the findings advance that only for some participants is work the connection to wider society, a point that relates to the ambiguity of the

status of small companies as borderline cases between owners and workers (Wapshott and Mallett 2016; see also: Friedmann 1980). Micro and small companies and family companies are numerous in the sample if excluding the manufacturing sector. These companies tend to internalise their struggles or rely on collaborations to make do, seeking profits in so far as they allow their own reproduction. While the mentality to grow further might be absent or feeble, hardly is this exclusively an ideological position, rather linked to some well-known limits of the rural locality (Fortunato 2014; Pato and Teixera 2016; see also: Section 1.2.1 and Section 3.3.2.3) and the industry of operation, expressed in small markets, seasonality, pluriactivity or problems in collaborations.

Private economic agents were not able to alter the structures that inform their decisions in the short term and as individuals, but rather adapted to their surrounding circumstances. Capturing the adaptational efforts of these companies to demographic challenges is however extremely difficult, because participants do not have clear future plans and, when they do, they are often more linked to changes in the services and products provided than the way they relate to the locality. **Participants' reflectivity leads them to acknowledge the limitations of their links to the locality**, articulated through apologies for their small actions, the endorsement of self-help as a potential way to remind that there is not always a plus to share, or proper crises of previous collective identities, where ways of living have been disrupted by the new economic system. It is not that participants lack affection or care towards the localities: but as to the actual means to bring change, there is no measurement nor lead. **They are lost on what they could do in their roles to help stop the downsides of demographic declines, despite having all interests in doing so, socially and economically**.

As the exploration attempted to grasp how these businesses can act upon rural resilience, it came across the limits of the basic assumptions of the methods used. There are **companies whose way to influence rural resilience are not direct nor based on the choices of participants and cannot simply be observed based on a screenshot of time**. No collective outcome could be derived by participants' individual actions, because individual behaviour, understanding and choices were minute and almost imperceptible. If one of these businesses were to disappear, neither Yabu nor Asago would probably be substantially worse off. It is mostly by virtue of their numbers and their longevity, the idea that relationships can become fixed into places, that these companies come to constitute the local socio-economy and enable its reproduction. Only observations on the field could bear witness of the graduality and slowness of rural decline: commercial streets that once were at the centre of vitality were left deserted, abandoned fields adorned with human-shaped puppets to keep them company, and people left wondering if their daughters and sons would come back home to take care of them in their old age. States do not

have a capacity to experience loss. The smallness of everyday life might make these businesses insignificant to the eyes of policy makers, or at least this is what some participants believed. **If there is an area where both states and individuals struggle is how to organise the chaotic, unstructured, and messy way in which socio-economies function as a whole, to identify the thread connecting them. And, one should add, this is still the challenge that scholars should take on**.

A second area supporting the risks of entrusting rural resilience only to private economic agents relates more to the structure of the local economy. What the study found was that, **even when the relationship between private economic agents and place can be mediated through work** and individuals have the possibility to use this channel to play a part in the regeneration of the rural socio-economy, **other conditions arise to limit the efficacy of labour shortages and demographic challenges as an incentive for companies to reconceive their management practices** in substantially different ways. As correctly pointed out by policymakers, demographic declines have an impact on the industrial structure (*Highlighting Japan* 2018), and competition for labour is partially driving the slow transformation of Yabu and Asago. However, while the overall trend observed is that of shrinkage, the unfolding of change is multifaceted. Hence, it is possible to find yet again the limits of the locality and the dynamics of global competition playing out in Yabu and Asago, as exemplified from the way local capital in the manufacturing sector is dispersed through the partial relocation of selected operations of (local) companies or the downsizing of existing businesses in the search for efficiency. The local socio-economies seem to be becoming more compact and businesses are specialising in the most competitive branches of their operations. Automation and mechanisation are also welcome in the countryside, and, as hinted in the findings and in the literature (Horii and Sakurai 2020; Schneider, Hong, and Le 2018), in Japan there are less fears related to the introduction of automation considering that they are largely complementary to work. Also as recognised by the empirical literature (Eggleston, Lee, and Iizuka 2021; Schneider, Hong, and Le 2018), however, the application of technology is strictly related to some sectors and irrelevant for the most unproductive sector, small companies operating in daily services. Overall, a rural techno-future seems very distant outside the factory.

In such process of reconfiguration, supposedly 'new' ways of working of the WSR agenda were found in the two localities. The paradox is that practices such as extended hiring of workers and flexibility in working hours, the flagship measures of the state (Kojima, North, and Weathers 2017), appear to have been used by participants before they were promoted as potential solutions to demographic challenges. Rural companies in some industries were 'ahead' of the WSR agenda. As detailed to great extent in the findings, ageing workers have often been employed, if healthy enough, to work in agriculture and manufacturing, aided by the lack of prejudices

against elders and the same age of participants. Flexibility in hours has been found to be a common measure to retain workers or attract women in consideration of their social role as carers and mothers (apparently because women after a certain age would not accept full-time work). Foreign workers, whose availability is dependent on the national regulations for immigration, are wanted and actively brought into the localities whenever possible. At the same time, companies' measures to attract new Japanese workers have dim prospects considering that participants rely on traditional recruitment policies which they themselves recognise are failing and in need for change. Participants are willing to expand participation of the labour force, but the nature of the jobs available in the countryside is often incompatible with existing gender stereotypes, and the stigma of blue collar jobs is strong.

**The state is, to a certain extent, hence proposing solutions which have been already adopted and that are compatible with little qualitative changes for the supposed final beneficiaries** — workers and, by extension, the local socio-economies, **essentially making political guidance for rural resilience superfluous and not too effective**. Because depopulation, outmigration and ageing are seen as processes inherent to the localities, defining characteristics of these places to which participants adapted throughout the years, **the presence of these measures did not appear to signal the emergence of more desirable workplaces, but rather the skilful ways through which rural companies have learnt to cope with small labour markets without having to drastically alter the basic conditions of production**. More radical changes in management practices were rarely introduced, firstly, because participants do not use such practices purposefully with a social aim in mind, and secondly, because many participants operate in industries which they report as lacking large profit margins. Moreover, several factories are located in rural areas *because* of their cheaper labour force. **Work will hardly change if the nature of rural enterprises stays the same.**

When participants want to do something extra for their workers, or if they want to help their communities, they prefer additional but one-off things: parties, gifts, socialising events, donations, and so forth. These are the activities that the literature on the contributions of companies to the rural socio-economy would emphasise (Steiner and Atterton 2015; see also: Section 1.2.2), but they are also activities whose precarious nature has substantial limits in terms of building rural resilience. They clearly show a positive engagement from participants with the surrounding society, but they do not suggest the appearance of any substantial changes on the horizon. Although positive management practices were found in local companies, **more sensitivity on the ambitions of the youth or type of work provided was found in newer companies, and the entry of the new generation of U-turners and I-turners might bring new strength to the rural**, something which has not escaped the literature (Obikwelu, Ikegami, and Tsuruta 2017).

Importantly for the scope of the study of the rural, although a finding based on few exceptional cases, some participants are actually building up on their own idea of the rural to create ways of working which might strongly benefit not only the countryside, but society more in general. Recalling the concept of rural entrepreneurship versus entrepreneurship in the rural (Korsgaard and colleagues 2015), there are participants that engage with place with an active reflexivity, with the conviction of forging better futures, embedding such beliefs in the way of organising work. In such circumstances, the employer and employee relationship might be seen as empowering rural resilience, and clearly an area through which participants could contribute to rural resilience.

Nonetheless, whether the emergence of this positive conjuncture requires more than the motivation of participants and the realisation of other conditions (e.g., operating in certain industries, the type of product/services, previous experiences channelling behaviour towards certain goals) is unclear in the research as it is in the literature, because **the participants identifying the potential of the company as a holistic, distributive force were a minority**. Exactly because of their potential and tangible benefits to the local socio-economy in terms of satisfaction of reciprocal human ambitions, it is important to go beyond normative claims to try to grasp the intersection between motivations, generational shifts, and areas of operations, and its influence on the renovation of the local socio-economy. This is an area of future exploration which might yield interesting insights on how private aims convert into social benefits, an exploration which might bring hopes for new ways of conceiving how socio-economies can be built.

Can private economic agents be the basis of rural revitalisation? To a limited extent. The research casts doubts that a revolution in the countryside might be initiated by private economic agents alone, especially under the current conditions. Society presents complexities that are beyond an individual's power to change, and, history having such a strong imprint in the fabric of the localities studied, escaping the state of decline might well boil down to the introduction of new types of enterprises in the countryside. This is not to downplay the importance of local, existing agents, who might themselves become channels towards this end. Businesses change their scope — the sample bears witness. But there must be forms of leadership. From the interviews with participants, no sense of cohesion appeared, as people moved along the lines of their operations without reaching out to other businesses. And while the local administrations might (and should) encourage companies to cooperate by establishing channels of communication, by trying to push them to go outside Yabu and Asago and personally reach to people to convince them that there is value in living and working in the countryside, it is also clear that resources to do so are limited. It is hard to plan and to generate money and flows of people when you start and stay with the bare minimum.

## 7.3 Reflecting on the rural and rural resilience: limitations of the study and future research

Rural studies have been questioned for uncritically assuming that state intervention or policy measures always work towards the wellbeing of the places they target, taking policies at their face value and attributing policy problems to implementation problems (Cloke and Little 1990). On the same line, studies on rural entrepreneurship have placed many expectations on the role of individuals in creating the conditions for the prosperity and the future of the countryside, largely ignoring how glorifying individual efforts might harm the same societies authors want to protect (Carmo et al. 2021; Ahl and Marlow 2019; Gill 2012). The research has attempted to provide a more nuanced vision about the role and capacity of the state and private economic agents in forging the rural and rural resilience which questions the oversimplified vision of state intervention in rural socio-economies and the overly optimistic tones of the applied rural literature, while at the same time not dismissing the importance of understanding what the rural means. There are two core points that the research aims to convey because of their implications: firstly, rural scholars have to engage with the concept of the rural; and secondly, when confronting stakeholders and resilience building, there is a need to go beyond normative positions and see resilience building not as a unilateral effort, but an encounter.

### 7.3.1 On the rural

Even after a century has passed since the concept of rural was first considered a slippery category of doubtful use, there is still value in engaging with the concept and surely more so than it appears in the recent literature. The rural, as it has been for long argued, is not a reliable sociological category — something I personally find undisputable at this stage of my journey. Territorially based categories do not facilitate understanding of what is being talked about, and often hide more than reveal. Yabu or Asago and other places could be described and understood without reference to their rurality, such as, for example, small socio-economies with a declining and ageing population and an outdated and ageing industrial structure, and one could have a better grasp of the problems to be expected. It is clear why the temptation to get rid of the concept altogether is strong and even sensitive.

It is, however, because of this fuzziness that, as rural scholars, ignoring or disregarding our relationship with space should not be an option. Each perspective on the rural found in the academic literature corresponds to a way to build our political spaces. Vague concepts are continuously used to produce and reproduce our world, and, most importantly, help determine the distribution of resources and the future life chances of many individuals. As the research has attempted to show, the way the rural is defined is deeply involved with how problems are framed

and tackled. Clearly, the rural is still mainly portrayed and acted upon through the agricultural system, as old dynamics linking state and rural socio-economies might be well-alive in the form of new problems. Individually, agriculture might not provide for the livelihood of people to such great extent, but collectively it matters a great deal because it activates a network of otherwise disconnected places, giving them weight — in positive and negative terms. **There does not seem to be an emerging cleavage which is able to deliver the same results in terms of representation in the political sphere as agriculture, and this is a major issue for scattered socio-economies which, by virtue of their size, might fail to satisfy basic social needs and are in need of the resources of the collectivity to survive**. The intrinsic contradiction is that, as long as agriculture monopolises attention, and as long as major problems are treated as appendixes of the agricultural problem, the revitalisation of rural socio-economies might not take place. But were the conflation between rural and agriculture to disappear, chances are that only a greater vacuum of representation will be created.

Scholars have recognised that the rural is differentiated, and that there has not been a specific single trajectory for how socio-economies develop. This is a very appropriate, factual consideration. Yabu and Asago, neighbours in the Tajima area, share many similarities between themselves, but they *might* present differences with, let's say, neighbouring Toyooka, a coastal, more touristic town which might *probably* present some features of rentier economies. Policymakers might recognise that territories are extremely different among themselves, but, just like scholars, might not have clear answers as to how collective efforts can be (efficiently) directed towards a diversity of territories (Saraceno 2013). In the case studied, politics mattered a great deal in how the rural is portrayed, but it is still reasonable that the logic of disparity, which leads to sectoral approaches to the rural, is not the absolute evil for policy makers when it is hard to visualise alternative options.

Abstractions are organising, governing principles of society, not exclusively a theoretical tool in the hands of scholars. Truly, as postmodernists say, there is always a degree of violence in being forcefully included or excluded in groups, categorised without consultations of our own subjectivity, measured against standards which do not belong to our value systems. But, in hypothetical scenarios, the creation of collective abstractions is not a monopoly of the powerful. It can be a domain of struggle, but one which first requires that agents in the variety of socio-economies forget about the many aspects which differentiate them and find a basis of communication — however minimal and precarious this might be.

Diversity cannot be used as a defensive argument which leads to inaction. This is why there is a need to go beyond the argument of diversity-for-diversity, or simply to spell out explicitly the terms of what diversity means. Does protecting diversity mean elevating the conditions of the

disadvantaged, regardless of where they inhabit? Does it mean, like conservational efforts in the arts, that there is a value beyond quantification in specific combinations of space and society which must be treasured, and would it apply to all combinations? Or is it more like conservation in biology, where you protect the environment and the ecosystem and lifestyles because you cannot foresee if and at what point of the future destroying them might bring harm to the rest of society? A (or maybe 'the') most valuable future direction for rural studies must include the construction of systems of morality, how to build arguments which unite societies in territories rather than isolate them. Lefebvre gave rural scholars a great source to study rural space as it is made through interpretations and actions, but we need more arguments about what we are looking for in territorially-bounded societies which are inclusive rather than inward looking.

In some ways, these already exist, the greatest example being the Political Economy of Agri-Food agenda, although this is organised around the resources of the rural rather than societies in places. The material appeal of the countryside might effectively be the most powerful leverage in terms of extra-local mobilisation, arguably because it touches upon wider notions of public goods, especially the environment and food safety and security. Nonetheless, exploring how concepts of diversity are used in other fields of study and for other social groups might inspire rural scholars to go beyond the latent risk of diffusing and reinforcing a politics of *divide et impera*, where strengthening one place at the expense of others only serves to weaken the power of the collective, or cultivating forms of what in Italy is known as *campanilismo*: what is seen from the church tower bell is what matters the most. Most likely, such search will imply the creation of other abstractions of what the rural is — any vision will always possess a discursive dimension as well as a concrete one.

### 7.3.2 On Rural resilience

The second point that the research aims at emphasising is that rural resilience building should be framed as a debate, a debate made not only of processes, but also by people and institutions, and the strategies and priorities which channel their efforts. When stating that rural resilience is situated, it means not only that the problems confronted in different societies might have specificities, or that there are variations in what rural or resilience are, but also that there are path-dependence and boundaries as to what is or is becoming acceptable as solutions to societal problems. Good negotiators know their counterparts and the arguments they will present. Similarly, rural scholars need to understand the boundaries of what is legitimate and the core stakeholders they aim at before interfacing with the rest of society.

Scholars in rural development have argued about the increasing importance of different stakeholders as drivers of change in the countryside, but not all stakeholders have the same roles

in a political economy or for rural resilience, at least, if you give the word 'rural' a collective nuance. The Japanese state overwhelmingly relies on the for-profit private sector to pursue its revitalisation strategy, in the belief that the economy is the major cure to societal problems. In turn, this implied that the most important dialogue to be observed is that between state and companies, working at the limits between society and the economy, and excluding other agents and agencies closely operating in rural affairs — a limitation of the research. Outside the state apparatus, only companies are expected to systematically contribute to solving problems by virtue of the innate interests.

This might not be the case in other countries. How do diverse governance structures matter for rural socio-economies? Are rural socio-economies better off when power and resources are less centralised? Or are state ideology and tradition more important to understand the distribution of resources within territories, regardless of the governance structure? It is necessary to better identify which traits of the political economic system might have an impact on territorial policymaking, as the variety of political economic systems might influence the type of intervention states favour or how states channel and imbue notions of rurality in policymaking. In turn, this might mean that alternative social, economic, and political groups might be better positioned to have their voices heard and access resources.

The case also partially obfuscates another important factor in building rural resilience, that is, that there is **no conclusive evidence that challenges emerging from demographic changes are best tackled through economic measures mediated by the market rather than social measures of other types** [64], although this is the main direction promoted in Japan because it aligns with fiscal austerity. As a matter of fact, if we look internationally, the greatest example of a countermeasure to demographic challenges in high-income countries, although not necessarily benefitting rural socio-economies, might be former Chancellor Angela Merkel's open-door policy bringing more than one million refugees to Germany. Japan itself is trying to operate on various fronts, which include as much free childcare as the concentration of services and monetary payments to incentivise the relocation to (fewer, selected) rural areas of citizens[65] — measures that are driven by different ministries and with different and competing rationales. Choosing a case study design based on a specific strategy and perspectives on the rural meant excluding the full range of possible options that exist to tackle demographic challenges.

[64] Partially, the lack of evidence reflects the disagreements as to whether population decline and ageing is a long-term problem at all. The Malthusian fear that resources are scarce while the world population is growing have contributed to underplaying the fact that intensive resource use can coexist with small populations.

[65] The COVID pandemic also aided introducing remote work in Japan, so that governments started regarding this form of work as a potential source of renovation of the countryside.

If anything, **the research cautions against a laisser-faire attitude attributing too much burden and responsibility for rural revitalisation on private economic agents**. Evidence from fieldwork highlights how private economic agents can do or want to do only so much for rural resilience, and these limitations relate both to the way the economic system works and the local economies have been built as well as to notions of responsibilities. Based on participants' accounts, awareness on the severity and meaning of demographic changes does not seem to automatically translate into action, or into building rural resilience. Capacities matter to anchor ambitions to concrete space. Empirically, by highlighting the diversity of attitudes of participants, the research has shown that work as a channel to rural resilience might be significant only for a part of private economic agents, while failing to reach the collective importance of smaller, existing companies. The quality of work in the countryside seems to reflect the marginal status of companies making up the socio-economic fabric of Yabu and Asago. Similarly, agriculture, for all its complexity and embeddedness, is a sector whose direction towards concentration and mechanisation/automation and less employment alters not so much the existence of links between agriculture and people, which might mutate in time but do not show signs of collapse, but the quality of these links. The willingness of participants to endorse their new roles as saviours of rural socio-economies seems to be extremely situated, meaning that participants' recognise their main function is to provide employment and produce profits—that is, as if they contribute by existing. It is the state who should then redistribute what is extracted from work(ers) to organise society. It is not only the state that identifies responsibilities: individuals do, too.

The precariousness of private economic agents' involvement in the making of rural resilience has serious implications for territorially bounded societies, in and outside Japan. Firstly, the logic of entrusting rural revitalisation to private economic agents improving their management practices because they need to do so to survive is naïve, because there is a lot of discretion on how to organise a company and as much doubt as to whether we want to entrust our futures overwhelmingly to members of society who are not accountable for their decisions to the public. It cannot be assumed that private economic agents always operate for the best of their workers or their societies. An important limitation of the research which could turn into an immensely beneficial contribution to the understanding of rural resilience is that the research, by design, cannot capture what people are looking for in work or in places, and that it cannot confirm whether what participants say is what is perceived by the other side, be it workers, families and so forth. Research crossing the experiences of private economic agents with the direct and indirect beneficiaries of their actions is a dire need, as it may give a fairer depiction of what actually can be done to attract new people, satisfy the ambitions of the locals, and help renovate

the cycle. Maybe, such works could also explore a rather controversial node ignored by scholars of rural entrepreneurship: if there are rural enterprises and rural entrepreneurs, are there also rural work and rural workers? If rural entrepreneurship involves 'an intimate relation between the entrepreneurial activity and the place where it occurs' (Korsgaard, Müller, and Tanvig 2015, 7), does rural work too require 'an intimate relation between the labour activity and the place where it occurs'? Is the possibility to represent something truly rural a monopoly of those who organise, or does it also belong to those who are organised? As long as enterprise is treated unidirectionally, answers might not come.

Secondly, it is important to ask: if companies do not endorse the role entrusted to them to sustain local socio-economies, will local administrations be left out of options to serve their constituencies? Under the current state of being and within the limits of the study, the willingness of the state to act on the weakest local socio-economies in a context of demographic changes is in doubt. There are established biases in the state's approach to the rural. As it was seen when looking at general spatial policies, not all societies in territories are treated in the same way. Building up the resilience of local socio-economies might have been posited to be an important factor for the future of cities and Japan as a whole by policy makers, economists, and demographists affiliated to state institutions, but nevertheless local socio-economies are mostly regarded as burdens to growth able to jeopardise the health of major metropolitan centres. Demographic challenges are not self-adjusting, although they might be self-reinforcing. However, it seems that the **Japanese state is compressing its role to the point that it is impossible to distinguish what it does *more* than individuals for rural socio-economies,** and so it also appears that the tools to create resilience for rural socio-economies are decreasing**. This deprives rural socio-economies, however defined, of a safety net in case of failure**. The state's approach to the variety of localities is biased by an emphasis on the economy, and the economy as it is.

Be reminded that the research does not endorse a theory of what the state is for, preferring to focus on its capacities as they are exercised under specific circumstances. There is a big gap in the rural literature explicitly considering the role of the state (a rare example is: Ashwood 2018), and further research could expand on the attitude of state agents towards the local socio-economies. In the situation presented in the research**, the state emerges as a protector of a system which reinforces current trends increasing inequalities, a conservative force rather than a progressive one** — not exactly the 'enabler' some rural development studies envisage (Bosworth et al. 2015; Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy 2022). Rather than rethinking the *type* of investment in local socio-economies, which might have contributed to create economic dependence from state resources, or even take charge of more dramatic measures for spatial

rationalisation which are distinguishable (and hence debatable, and improvable) (Kilkenny 2010), the strategy followed by the state is to detach itself from the destiny of less financially autonomous localities, with state support becoming unsystematic and unpredictable. What was reported by Woods from the Antipodes seems fit for Japan as well: 'the responsibility for failure rests with the local community itself. It is only a small step from this logic to a rationality that justifies the withdrawal of state aid for development from certain "uneconomic" localities' (2011c). It is really unsurprising that previous studies on rural revitalisation have concluded that localities need to gather whatever strength they have left and self-organise in the advent of further demographic changes, leveraging on the affect and feelings of their citizens (Dilley, Shinzato, and Ando 2017). If they do not, there might not be alternatives.

Hence, we come to the last part of the thesis: what can we learn from the case and what can be done to revitalise rural socio-economies? There is not a simple answer precisely indicating how much or what state and private economic agents might do to renovate declining local socio-economies. **States and private economic agents do not have the same capacities nor responsibilities**, and, to a certain extent, the emerging doubt is that the two should stay separate, acting as different channels to distribute and redistribute wealth, resources, values, opportunities and so forth.

The biggest message the research wants to share is that the conflation between roles and responsibilities of agents and entities in a political economy might be contributing to damaging local socio-economies by downplaying the need for collective action of political nature. It has been a recurring litany that the local is made of complex dynamics, local and extra-local. Problems too have local and extra-local dimensions, and different levels of complexity. People can change *some aspects* of the local socio-economies they make and inhabit by remodelling their behaviours and beliefs, but they cannot change the larger socio-economies that equally help making them, and especially so if they do not join forces.

States need to be held accountable for their share in the revitalisation of local socio-economies, and this implies observing what states do, not supposing what they should do. States need not to intervene directly in each and every single aspect of human lives, but the constant disinvestments from rural areas and the pressures for self-sufficiency are not aiding the establishment of a new basis for rural socio-economies. Even shrinkage and compactisation require investments and law-making to guarantee the dignity of the people affected. Whereas it is reasonable that not all endangered localities will survive, due to either migration or exhaustion, policies need to be conceived to manage decline and growth rather than to abandon people to their own destiny. The state cannot force people to have more children, to migrate or stay, but it can incentivise them to concentrate, as a long-term strategy and as a form of societal support, a choice given to people.

The modus operandi of the state of engaging-to-disengage needs to be challenged in its core assumptions, not on the failure of a programme.

Left to speculation, if forced to say what places like Yabu and Asago need that the state could potentially provide within the economic system, I would argue that industrial policies might still be needed to help socio-economies renovate, but deprived of the distrust that, because people live in smaller environments, they will not successfully make the best use of what is given to them, allowing only less innovative programmes to target the countryside when public resources are involved. 'Pragmatically', this might mean bringing emerging sectors to the countryside or to secondary cities working as hubs, preferential policies giving advantage to consortia or groups of small companies in public bids, but also upgrading the educational offer in the countryside to match today's needs and the evolving structures of the economy, be it ICT, medicine and nursery, law, marketing, sports, or whatever direction seems more promising to experts. The complex of the material countryside, destined to produce and export only tangible goods, would benefit from a revision formulated around the potential of people's creativity, and especially the youth as, however paradoxical that sounds, in an ageing and declining demography this segment of the population struggles to be represented, economically, politically, and socially (Turner 1989; Traphagan 2008; Okazawa et al. 2019; Umeda 2022; Kweon and Choi 2021). Revising property rights on non-agricultural land might also be an extremely contentious but needy area for reform to confront. Businesses gather in several small, scattered, commercial plazas outside the city centre (largely deserted), and residences are extremely dispersed, with minimal transportation systems. There are enormous architectonical barriers to socialisation, which might also affect the perception of places as decaying and privy of life. At the moment, it is unclear how to encourage people to live or work closer to each other. The state could launch investigations (and even NSSZs, considering the emphasis on regulatory reform) as to what type of measures might incentivise concentration. What does it take for people to relocate closer? What would they want in exchange for giving up part of their habits and previous lives? Does it necessarily imply killing diversity? It is not possible to know, because there is a lack of experimentation, and even research, in such contentious areas.

But these vague suggestions might have little meaning, not only because of their lack of accuracy, because this is not a study commissioned by someone who has the power to initiate change, or because I would still argue for discerning the role of the researcher from that of policy adviser, but because **the major issue to be highlighted is that there is, at this moment, very little basis to advance any demand**, **and building this foundation is what people in local socio-economies might be urged to work on**. Overall, the dialogue between the state and local socio-economies seems unidirectional, and **what needs to change might well be the terms of the**

**dialogue**. One is left to wonder if disillusionment with the way our societies work rather than pure conviction makes up the reasons why scholars operate and focus on solving local problems. The impression is that rural scholars are tacitly accepting the legitimacy of state withdrawal from rural socio-economies, giving a false sense of security that it is sufficient or necessary to act locally, because, as individuals, a local focus might seem more achievable, less idealistic and more concrete. The research advances that this interpretation is simplistic. **Without a sense of collectivity, there is also no sense of purpose and no power to stand for the variety of societies**. As Lapping commented on the lack of articulation of US rural policies, 'visions provide direction for action' (1992, 240) and **rural Japan might lack one which has substance for the citizens of rural socio-economies**.

## 7.4 Concluding remarks and contributions of the research

The research adds to existing knowledge and academic practice in rural studies in several directions. Most importantly, the study offers a more nuanced vision around the interrelationships between the state and private economic agents in forging the future of rural socio-economies, one which explicitly engages with the concept of rural and highlights rather than hides or undervalues its importance. If accepting that rural resilience is co-constituted by top-down and bottom-up forces, by the intersections between the workings of the larger political economy and the changes taking place within localities and enacted by individuals or groups of individuals, part of the rural research agenda can actively question the motivations and strategies of the different stakeholders involved without prejudice, at the top and at the bottom, highlighting how the different capacities each stakeholder has may influence rural resilience. Such efforts are complementary rather than substitutive to studies focusing on the old and new processes unfolding in the countryside, such as commodification, gentrification, industrialisation and so forth.

The research thus participates in the larger debate on the resilience of rural socio-economies by proposing a multi-level analysis structured around Lefebvre's spatial triad as elaborated by Halfacree (2006) to study the production of rural space, supported by the Realist Evaluation Framework (Pawson and Tilley 2004) to analyse state intervention, and a more empirical approach, dictated by the inductive element of the research and related to empirical studies on rural enterprise and entrepreneurship, to grasp private economic agents' role in the making of the rural and rural resilience. Importantly, the study advances that any understanding of rural resilience building needs to be seen as a debate, where not only agents within the localities formulate their own vision on how to achieve the betterment of their socio-economies, but the state and the wider society place expectations upon them as well, assigning certain roles and responsibilities. If, and that is itself an object of discussion, scholars feel a duty to address

policymakers on behalf of or in partnership with local interests and serve as bridges between localities and elsewhere located centres of power, they will need to deeply consider the basic assumptions within which those who are supposed to redistribute resources for the collectivity operate. Without such considerations, there is a possibility that the many voices representing the diversified countryside will become monologues or transform into echo-chambers for like-minded scholars and practitioners, and that rural resilience will be built selectively, reinforcing the strongest and forgetting the weakest.

In terms of new empirical, methods-related, and research practice insights, the research includes several aspects of potential interest to rural researchers, both in terms of better understanding the role of private economic agents in tackling the challenges demographic changes bring upon socio-economies and in terms of doing international research as a non-native speaker. By choosing Japan as the country under investigation as an extreme example of the post-demographic transition and the ageing society, the study confronts not only a specific problem which affects a multitude of countries, but also a series of problematics that derive from the undeniable geographical bias in the rural literature which overrepresents the UK, the US and the European experiences in conceptual and empirical academic creation (Woods 2012; Mark Shucksmith and Brown 2016).

Firstly, looking at the field of rural entrepreneurship and its role in resilience building, the thesis qualifies the understanding and actions of Japanese private economic agents towards rural resilience. In particular, differently from existing works which tend to provide loose notions of contributions based on participants' self-assessment or resilience building as the sum of all the undirected, positive efforts carried out by agents, the research interprets the role played by participants by dissecting how their management decisions intersect with demographic changes, keeping focus on the main problem affecting rural socio-economies rather than accumulating disparate observations on the goodness of entrepreneurship. Hence, the study leads to a better appreciation on the transformation of rural socio-economies and their future prospects by exploring the rationales behind recent management practices, such as the role of technology and innovation and labour management practices, as well as notions of responsibilities towards the local socio-economies, that is to say, how participants envision and embrace the increased expectations placed upon them. Hence, the study can be seen as an invitation to a more critical attitude towards the evaluation of the role of private economic agents as well as towards more clarity about what resilience is about in a certain, situated context.

Secondly, the study can be helpful to future researchers who operate in international settings, especially those who navigate in high uncertainty environments, namely, where there is a lack of previous experience about the research sites and the capacity of carrying out fieldwork as well as

a limited autonomy of the researcher due to language barriers. In terms of research practice, it provides a first-hand account on the difficulties of obtaining and processing data in a foreign language which does not eschew economic, time-related, and method-related considerations, with the hope that researchers will not be discouraged from undertaking international research but will do so with the necessary preparations and mindset.

Relatedly, while studying rural socio-economies as someone not acquainted with the local language is unusual (indeed, language requirements are common in academic positions on rural affairs), it is important for understanding how the context influences the position of the researcher and, consequently, the research outcomes. Rather than talking about adding knowledge, the last point in which the research might add value regards considerations on the reflexivity of the researcher and the social role they have. Underlying the thesis is an ethical (and probably political) perspective detached from that most often encountered in qualitative rural studies, which might feature personal engagement and pre-existing deep connections to places or ideas of places. The thesis overall remains a personal journey to overcome unfamiliarity, and knowledge is fed as much by learning new things as by unlearning old ones. Concepts such as rural or resilience, which might be used with *nonchalance* as lay concepts where Latin terms are part of the language heritage, had to be contextualised to be meaningful in the Japanese case, and such contextualisation pointed at the core problematics of fuzzy terms and the systematic lack of international, 'rural' histories in English. Similarly, the sense of empowerment of the researcher might be moderated when operating in international settings, because self-doubt and the fear of inadvertently becoming the 'white saviour' drive the researcher to an enhanced awareness of their own limits. It is a humbling process, one which reminds that an individual, however knowledgeable or prepared, may not want to cross the lines between providing as accurate as possible information and perspectives on a certain issue and discarding the complex processes of decision-making and democratic representation that can make any observation meaningful in practice.

Rural resilience is built and shaped by different forces in the political economy, which coexist, interact, and define the destiny of the countryside. Questions around the rural area are complex, partial and can obfuscate inequality, poverty and issues that transcend rurality. This research has opened up a new discussion on how rural resilience shapes entrepreneurial practice, state policy interventions, and the reproduction of the local socio-economies.

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