

A FRAGILE SEED OF SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN POST-DISASTER AFFECTED AREAS OF TOHOKU, JAPAN¹

FUMIHIKO SAITO

The world today faces a series of crises, and many observers have started to realize that the root cause of these crises is market capitalism. In such a context, the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant accident hit the north-eastern part of Japan on 11 March 2011. “3.11” has accelerated the long-term structural changes of rural Japan such as depopulation. Nine years since the disasters, one positive sign is the emergence of networks between producers and consumers who are now reciprocally connected. This article pays particular attention to a new monthly delivery package of magazine and food called, Tohoku Food Communication (TFC), first released in July 2013. The experiences of TFC can be interpreted as a fragile yet significant seed to promote social and solidarity economy (SSE). This paper critically examines both possibilities and limitations of SSE, which may contribute to making our society more sustainable than now.

Keywords: “3.11”; natural disaster; Tohoku Food Communication (TFC); social and solidarity economy (SSE); sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has been endeavouring to achieve the modern industrial society. With industrialization, economic prosperity has been realized for a significant proportion of people, particularly for those in the Northern hemisphere. However, this achievement did not come without costs. Continuous economic growth was enabled by hugely increased consumption of energy and resources. It is no surprise that the extent of environmental degradation of the Earth is becoming so apparent recently.

Address of the corresponding author: Fumihiko Saito, Faculty of International Studies, Ryukoku University, 67 Tsukamoto-cho, Fukakusa Fushimi-ku, Kyoto 612-8577, Japan, e-mail: fs36jp@gmail.com.

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Under these circumstances, many analysts started to recognize that the root cause of our problem is our “addiction to economic growth” (Latouche 2009). There is a growing consensus that in order to resolve the current crises, we need a genuine paradigm shift: economic growth can no longer deliver prosperity to humanity. We really need alternative economic systems that can at least supplement, if not replace, mainstream capitalism. In this sort of pluralistic economy, not only can the environmental conditions of our planet be improved, but resilience against various risks can be secured (Laville 2007).

One promising candidate for such an alternative is social and solidarity economy (SSE). In conventional market economies, there is a wide division between producers and consumers, as each would opt to sell and buy goods and services respectively using price signals. In globalized market economies, producers and consumers usually do not know each other. Through complex division of labour, their economic autonomy tends to be significantly curtailed.

In contrast, in SSE, producers and consumers are connected with each other through exchanges of goods and services that each appreciates. Often, they know each other well, and their repeated transactions foster mutual trust. The reciprocal relationship also enhances respective autonomous capabilities. As a result, their economic relationship is embedded in particular social contexts (Polayni 1944), and starts to demonstrate a “public nature” (Utting 2015). In short, SSE goes beyond the conventional profit-maximizing economy. SSE seeks fairness and justice in (re)connecting economic activities with family, society and political authority (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2019).

This article pays attention to Tohoku, Japan, which was severely hit by disasters. Disasters disrupt society and economy, and particularly marginalize the weak and vulnerable. The UN estimated that from 1998 to 2017, disasters took the lives of 1.3 million people and caused economic losses of about \$3 billion (UNISDR and CRED 2018). And, as our global environment continues to deteriorate, more disasters will occur in the near future. Yet, these unfortunate occasions also provide opportunities in which some start to engage on new activities such as SSE (Utting 2015). Thus, whereas disasters dislocate victims both physically and socio-economically, they can also stimulate innovation (Polayni 1944).

The disaster for our examination is Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE) that took place on 11 March 2011. GEJE is one of the major natural disasters that the world suffered in recent years. Prior to the GEJE, industrialization pushed primary industries to the side-lines. But they still remained important, because many small-scale family-based businesses centred around farming and fishing. Yet a significant number of such businesses had already started to suffer from depopulation and aging in rural Japan. “3.11” accelerated the long-term structural decline of local communities. With nine years since 2011, while there has been some noticeable progress on rebuilding physical infrastructure, rejuvenating rural communities now faces daunting challenges. This difficulty is particularly acute now in Fukushima,

because urban consumers still prefer not to purchase Fukushima's agricultural products even if they are proven safe (Hamada *et al.* 2015).

On the other hand, one positive sign in the post-"3.11" period is maturing relationships between rural producers and urban consumers. Before "3.11", such relations were too weak to be a foundation for effective risk communication. However, in the post-disaster period, some primary producers started to engage in innovative activities. For example, some started to sell their produce directly to consumers using the Internet. More consumers visited farms for helping producers than in the pre-"3.11" period. Through repeated interactions, mutual understanding has been fostered. This article pays particular attention to a new monthly delivery package of magazine and food together called, Tohoku Food Communication (TFC), whose inaugural issue was released in July 2013. The TFC is considered an emerging case of SSE, because it connects producers and consumers. Currently, this seed of SSE may potentially be significant in overcoming the ill-effects of capitalism. However, in order for such new attempts to be really successful, the government and the society as a whole need to support these activities so that the economy can become more pluralistic than before, instead of being monolithic – an economy dominated only by market capitalism.

After reviewing the literature on SSE, this article proceeds to a case study of TFC. During the fieldwork mainly in coastal areas of Tohoku, Japan in 2014, 2016, 2017, and 2018, key informant interviews were conducted with policy makers, disaster victims, local journalists, and supporters of the affected. Participant observations were also carried out in several farms and fishing ports. Interviews were also conducted with consumers in Tokyo in 2017. These interviews were semi-structured, focusing on changes between pre- and post-disaster times, interpretations of damages and exclusion, perceptions of social justice in the recovery processes, as well as opinions about the alternative economy. As a result, the testimonies of primary producers and other stakeholders were obtained. They are supplemented by other information such as national and local government statistics. In examining the TFC case, an interdisciplinary approach to SSE, especially based on critical economic thinking originating from Polanyi (1944), reflective rural sociology (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019), as well as social innovation, is adopted (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019). The case study approach is justified, because it is essential to contextualize why and how a seed of SSE is born and has grown (Bruni and Zamagni 2013). Investigation of both facilitating and prohibiting factors of such seeds can contribute to deepen our understanding of SSE both theoretically and empirically (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2019).

THE CRISES OF MODERN CAPITALISM

Since the Industrial Revolution (IR) in the 18th Century, humanity hoped to achieve prosperity through realizing the modern industrial society. The pursuit of

modernity brought prosperity in Europe and North America, where general living conditions have been much improved. This experience has convinced the world that the same strategy can be applied globally. Since the end of World War II, developmentalism has become a global passion, in the belief that economic growth would alleviate poverty that was still pervasive in the Global South. The industrialized countries started to provide aid to developing countries (Rist 2014).

Yet, achieving economic growth was not without costs. In the industrialized countries, rapid economic growth was made possible by the unprecedented use of often non-renewable energy and materials. Indeed, rapid economic growth in these countries was accompanied by serious environmental degradation. Their experiences led to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. However, human exploitation of Earth's resources remained unabated. A global footprint analysis shows the level of environmental burdens already surpassed what the Earth can endure around 1970 (WWF 2016, 75).

This evidence forces us to rethink our economic logic. In modern capitalism, it is conventionally understood that the more production, the bigger the economy, and more prosperity. The rationale is that economic growth enables improvements of living standards for all social groups even if the *haves* benefit more than the *have-nots*. Thus, policy makers, particularly in times of recession, have strived to expand production. Such quantitative expansion has been measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Constant economic growth has almost become a political obsession, because unless the economy keeps expanding, incumbent political leaders face serious difficulties of re-election (Spence 2009).

However, since the end of the 20th century, the fallacies of modern capitalism have become more obvious than before. GDP is an aggregation of all production; it not only includes "goods" but also "bads" such as pollutants. In addition, with capitalism, there usually is a cycle of bubble and burst. There have been much discussion about how to make economy more resilient to shocks and instabilities. Moreover, in capitalism, people are encouraged to sell more and buy more goods, often on credit. Yet, in reasonably mature economy, purchasing more does not necessarily mean enhanced life-satisfaction. Economic logic seriously deviates from feelings of happiness (Jackson 2016).

Furthermore, capitalism has three inherent contradictions. First, in capitalism, human exploitation of natural resources is free and limitless. Second, capitalism cares about production but ignores reproduction of human resources. Third, markets do not function autonomously without regulatory functions backed by the state (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). Yet often neo-liberal economic policies assume that markets function by themselves, and it is preferable to let markets work without government intervention. These contradictions were already pointed out by Karl Polanyi (1944), and have increasingly attracted our attention as more people are now disappointed with an ever-globalizing economy.

Therefore, many analysts now think that the time is ripe to seek alternative economic mechanisms that can at least supplement market capitalism. One promising

possibility is SSE. In conventional market economies, producers and consumers usually do not know each other. Producers sell and consumers buy goods and services primarily depending on price signals, as competitions through markets result in determining appropriate prices. There usually is a wide division between producers and consumers. In addition, elaborated processes of division of labour curtail autonomy of both producers and consumers significantly, although both of them often do not notice such limitations.

In contrast, in SSE, producers and consumers are connected with each other through the exchange of goods and services that each appreciates. Often, they know each other well. They share common values and aspirations. Their reciprocal relationship is based on mutual trust. The goods and services reflect narratives that both producers and consumers highly appreciate. Often, consumers are willing to participate in processes of production with producers, because such participation enables them to make production more useful and effective. This co-production enhances respective autonomous capabilities. As a result, their economic relationship starts to demonstrate a “public nature”. With the mutually trusted relationship between producers and consumers, mass production for the sake of selling more material goods does not have to take place. As each good and service reflect what is mutually valued, life-satisfaction can also be enhanced (Utting 2015). In addition, without unnecessary production and consumption, SSE is hoped to be more environmentally friendly (UN TFSSE 2014; UNRISD 2016). Accordingly, SSE is not only about democratic management by entities such as cooperatives and social enterprises, but also about ensuring fairness and justice in re-embedding the economy within a broader picture of household and family, non-monetized spheres of society as well as political authority (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2019).

Some early ideas of SSE are already found in the work of Polanyi (1944). As more ideas and practices of SSE have grown, it has gained wider acceptance both among academics and practitioners than before (CIRIEC *et al.* 2015). More recently, a famous RIPESS charter emphasized the following core values as essence of SSE: humanism; democracy; solidarity; inclusiveness; subsidiarity; diversity; creativity; sustainable development; equality, equity and justice for all; respecting the integration of countries and people, and; a plural and solidarity-based economy². In short, SSE is an economy that supports social inclusion and justice for all.

The application of SSE is considered particularly effective in food and agriculture. Today, with economic globalization, cheap food products are processed in developing countries and shipped to rich nations. Whereas the global supply chain generates wealth for a few multi-national companies, subsistent farmers in the Global South continue to suffer from income poverty and deteriorating human agency in the global networks. This situation is unsustainable (Local Futures 2019), and calls for urgent attention to be paid to both production as well as consumption

² See <http://www.ripest.org>.

sides. Agriculture, particularly in Asia, has historically been playing important roles not only in producing food for human consumption, but also in preserving local ecosystems mainly through rice paddies (UNU-IAS *et al.* 2014). The multi-functionality of agriculture should be enhanced. Food consumption is also essential for family and households, many of whose activities include non-monetized economic engagements. Attaining food security is essential for reproduction. In addition, selling and buying food items often tend to be more than price matters alone. For consumers, food is one of the readily understandable items for realizing a sustainable lifestyle. If they can secure reliable food suppliers for repeated transactions, this sort of interdependent relationship between producers and consumers is more valuable than what ordinary market transactions entail. This reasoning resonates with the idea of sustainable food consumption (Reisch *et al.* 2013). SSE in food and agriculture thus has a good potential in trying to overcome the three inherent contradictions of capitalism of limitless nature, ignored reproduction and separating economy from public authority (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

Therefore, it is no surprise that there is an increasing attention to neo-endogenous rural development, where primary industries play an indispensable role (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019). Neo-endogenous ruralism resonates with SSE especially in sustainable livelihoods and democratic governance. According to this notion, enhanced human agency reciprocally being connected with other stakeholders can contribute to life-satisfaction, which is beyond what the simplistic price mechanism generates. Rural issues can be resolved through the dynamic relationships of stakeholders, whose functionality is open for those who are keen to realize social justice in economic transactions. One such example will be illustrated in our case study.

“3.11” AS A TRIPLE DISASTER

On 11 March 2011, a powerful earthquake of magnitude 9.0 hit the eastern coast of Tohoku, Japan. About 30 minutes later, areas of more than 650 km along the Pacific Ocean were hit by an unprecedented tsunami, whose height was about 10 meters. The tsunami inundated an area of more than 550 km². These natural disasters also triggered the nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima Prefecture. Three nuclear reactors at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant suffered a level-7 meltdown. While the earthquake and tsunami were natural disasters, the nuclear accident was clearly man-made. Thus, “3.11”, or the Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE) Disaster, is widely known as a triple disaster (Birmingham and McNeill 2012; Fukushima Booklet Committee 2016).

The affected area was widespread, and the casualties and damages in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures were significant. As of March 2020, the death toll was nearly 20,000. The number of wounded was more than 6,000. 2,500 people

were still missing. The number of houses either totally or partially damaged was approximately 1.15 million (Fire and Disaster Management Agency 2020). As the nuclear power plant accident contaminated wide areas, evacuees, both voluntarily and involuntarily, from these areas were numerous. The approximate number of evacuees peaked in December 2012 with 62,000 outside Fukushima Prefecture and 100,000 within the Prefecture. The numbers were reduced to 33,000 and 9,000 respectively in January 2019 (Nikkei Newspaper 2019.03.11).

The “3.11” disaster undoubtedly affected Tohoku in many different ways. While the proportionate share of Tohoku in the national GDP was less than 10% prior to “3.11”, the region was still important for primary industries. Tohoku continued to supply not only food and natural resources but also human resources to Tokyo, all of which were needed to fuel rapid economic growth in Tokyo and its surrounding areas since the 1960s. It may thus not be an exaggeration to say that Tohoku served as a kind of colony for the Tokyo metropolitan area. Within the unequal relationship between Tohoku and Tokyo, the metropolis was considered more important than the rural areas. Arguably, the extent of capitalism development in Japan has reached its full maturity over the last 150 years, during which imperialism, war and domestic colonization were all employed (Shinoda 2013).

This background has inscribed important psychological effects on the minds of the people. It has created a mindset in which primary industries are not attractive as a good job for young people. Even if primary industries, particularly in Tohoku, have been very important, the youth have tended to look for office jobs in the cities. For youngsters in Tohoku, white-collar jobs in Tokyo appeared more appealing than staying at home and inheriting agriculture or fisheries from their parents. Indeed, if the youth decided to become fishermen, they were ridiculed as “going to the fridge” (Takahashi 2016). This testimony symbolized the situation of the primary industries in Tohoku before the disasters.

Tohoku before “3.11”, therefore, had already started to suffer from serious socio-economic illnesses. As the primary industries could no longer attract the youth, those who remained in Tohoku were mainly the elderly. It was precisely the elderly who were bearing the burden of tough manual labour in the primary industries; in many instances, once they retired from their business, no one took their place. Depopulation and aging were more than demographic phenomena. Rather, they had serious implications for political, economic and social aspects.

The “3.11” disaster accelerated the trends in many ways. Due to the compounded disasters, many jobs were lost, and it has been far from easy to re-establish many business activities. The problems that were already apparent before “3.11” become even more serious in the post-disaster period (Bacon and Hobson 2014: 198). The deteriorating situation is further compounded by the fact that the recovery and rebuilding processes have suffered from unending delays. This situation has forced quite a number of primary producers to decide not to return to their homelands anymore. Thus, more farms have been abandoned and less fishing

rights have been inherited than the time of the immediate aftermath of “3.11”. In Fukushima, the radiation issue apparently made the matter worse. Many people came to be deeply anxious about whether they would be able to continue living in their homelands. More specifically, primary industries were banned shortly after the nuclear accident, as health effects due to radiation were very uncertain. Many primary producers lost their sources of income.

This is the context in which post-disaster recovery and reconstruction have been pursued. The government policies, together with other actions, understandably had a big impact on Japan. Unfortunately, the reasoning behind several key economic policies did not gain a good understanding among the disaster-victims. The main reason was (and still is) that although many lost their houses and income, the government never attempted to compensate these losses. The government explained that they would assist the victims, but no tax money would be able to supplement income or wealth (e.g. rebuilding individually owned housing) even in cases of severe natural disasters. The government justified its position by arguing that in market economy, each stakeholder is responsible for his or her acts. Therefore, after “3.11”, it soon became apparent that public trust in the government had significantly reduced. This distrust led to revitalize civic political movements (Fukushima Booklet Committee 2016). It is no coincidence that of all the efforts that unfolded in the grassroots of Tohoku, Japan, some innovative experiments were born without relying on government support. These innovations have been seeking some sort of alternative to mainstream market capitalism. Although “3.11” affected the whole economy, it fundamentally affected the ways in which the primary industries were perceived among urban consumers.

FUKUSHIMA’S AGRICULTURAL PRODUCE

Shortly after the Nuclear Power Plant accident, the national government of Japan banned agriculture in Fukushima. Farmers were not allowed to grow any rice or vegetables, nor sell these through markets. The ban even included cultivation for self-consumption. Normalizing agriculture has been a complex story. The government established the radiation standards for agricultural produce shortly after the “3.11” accident, due largely to health concerns. A radiation monitoring system was introduced, and the Governor of Fukushima Prefecture declared that all rice from Fukushima was safe in October 2011. However, it was subsequently found that some rice produce was above the official radiation level. This situation made consumers very anxious. Thus, from the harvest of 2012 till now, Fukushima farmers agreed to test every single rice and vegetable package before it was sent to market. This monitoring system is very laborious and costly. Furthermore, this method is scientifically unnecessary; it is sufficient to conduct sample testing for rice packages. However, farmers have been convincing themselves that in order to

gain consumer confidence, this extensive monitoring is the only realistic pathway to normalize their agriculture (Hamada *et al.* 2015).

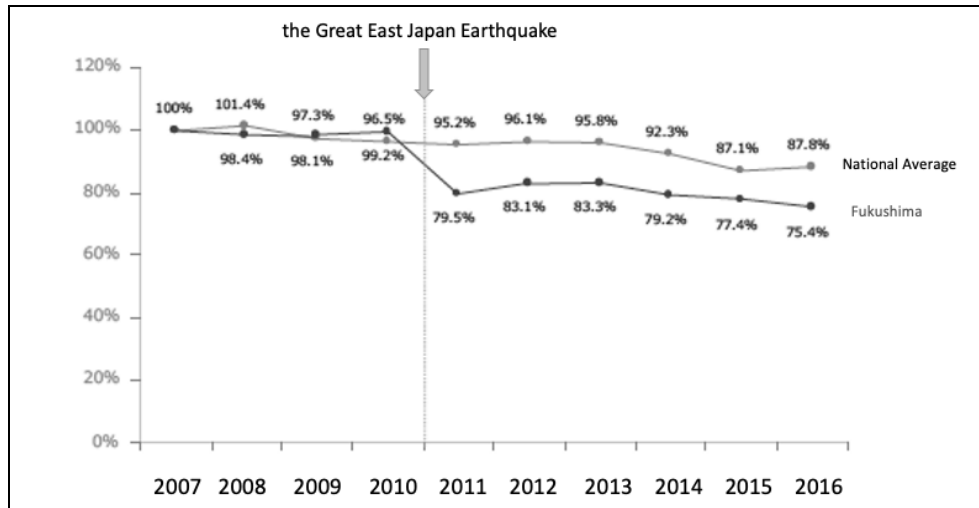
Thanks to the tireless endeavours of farmers, the level of agricultural production in Fukushima has been recovering reasonably well. The production level has almost regained the level of the pre-disaster period. The prefectural data shows that the 2016 total production sales amount was about 207 billion yen compared with 233 billion yen in 2010 (a year before the disasters), and the 2016 sales of Fukushima ranked the 17th among the 47 prefectures (Fukushima Prefecture 2018: 30). Rice is a staple food in Japan, and is one of the major harvests in Fukushima. Its production level, compared with the national average in the post-2011 period, has been recovering well as well. Taking 2007 as a base year of 100%, the national average of rice production in 2016 was 88% and that of Fukushima was 75% (*Figure 1*). The farmgate price for Fukushima rice compared with the national average was approximately 10% lower in 2014 and was 5% lower still in 2016 (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) 2018, 8). While the gap between the national average and Fukushima still remains, the situation may not be too bad considering the extensive suffering of Fukushima agriculture in the post-“3.11” period.

However, the current situation in the first quarter of 2020 is very complex – probably more complex than the time immediately after the disasters. This complexity arises from two inter-related factors. First, urban consumers’ understanding toward Fukushima produce has been fluctuating. At the time immediately after the disasters, consumers’ reactions were divided into two types. One was to purchase Fukushima produce of pre-disaster harvest in order to show their support for disaster-affected primary producers. As time passes, however, this type of purchase was losing momentum. The problem relates to another type of reaction, that is to try and avoid any Fukushima produce as much as possible because of radiation fears. Several government data show that the proportion of consumers avoiding agricultural produce of disaster-affected areas has been declining since “3.11”. Yet, among the disaster-affected prefectures, Fukushima is clearly still least preferred by the consumers (MAFF 2018). Even if the level of radiation subsequently became significantly reduced and was proven to be non-threatening to consumers’ health, only very few who used to purchase Fukushima produce before “3.11” came back to repurchase it (Hamada *et al.* 2015).

What makes the situation more complex is that even if the government tries to disseminate information about the testing and monitoring of agricultural produce of Fukushima, *more* consumers demonstrate their ignorance about the extensive monitoring system in place. Alarmingly, the level of ignorance has been *increasing* recently, according to the periodic surveys by the Consumer Affairs Agency (*Figure 2*). This unfortunate situation may not be so surprising. Within nine years of the “3.11”, more consumers came to be disinterested in the primary industries in Fukushima.

Figure 1

The amount of rice produce: the national average and Fukushima

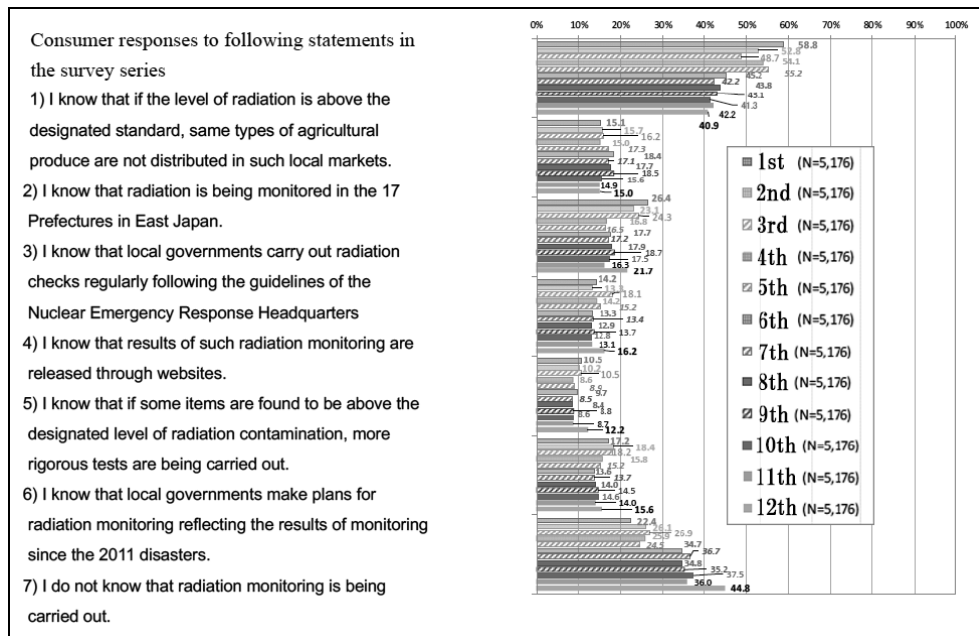


Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2018, p. 15.

Note: Taking 2007 as a base year of 100%.

Figure 2

Consumer Understanding about Radiation Monitoring through Surveys



Source: Consumer Affairs Agency 2019, p. 9.

Second, the recent marketing situation of Fukushima produce demonstrates social injustice. Although production has been recovering reasonably satisfactorily, the recovering level of production has not been fully rewarding the farmers. Consumers in major cities in Japan still prefer not to buy Fukushima rice if they see the packages in supermarkets. Thus, the price level is approximately 10–15% lower than the comparable quality of rice harvested in Japan (MAFF 2018). But, the quality of Fukushima rice is one of the highest in the nation. Thus, major food distributors and operators of supermarkets and convenience stores are taking advantage of this situation and purchasing a significant proportion of Fukushima rice in order to make and sell rice balls, one of the very popular food items in Japan. Consumers in fact buy the rice balls being made of Fukushima rice, but without knowing it. Why? It is because that according to the Japanese regulations, labels of rice balls sold in supermarkets and convenience stores have to show whether rice is domestically produced or not. But, they do not need to demonstrate in which prefecture rice is harvested. The result is that the major distributors and operators of supermarket and convenience stores benefit from a large amount of rice ball sales, but not Fukushima farmers. This situation reveals that the current economic transaction is totally unfair for the Fukushima farmers (Asahi Newspaper 2019.03.17). Arguably, as a system as a whole, this injustice is partly deriving from indifference and ignorance of the consumers. As the current economic situation of Fukushima agriculture is far from simple, it needs much more nuanced understanding.

TOHOKU FOOD COMMUNICATION

The notion of SSE is crucial to implement economic justice. There are several examples of SSE in post-disaster Japan. Probably the most noticeable endeavour is Tohoku Food Communication (TFC). TFC is a package of magazine and food, monthly delivered to the doorstep of subscribers. The magazine features unique stories of primary producers. A limited amount of food produced by those who appear in that issue of the magazine is included in the package. The first was issued in July 2013, about two years after “3.11”³.

TFC was started by Mr. Hiroyuki Takahashi, who was born and raised in rural Tohoku but attended college and worked in Tokyo for several years. Upon returning home, he served as a lawmaker for the prefectural assembly and was eager to revive primary industries in Tohoku before the disasters (Takahashi 2016). “3.11” provided a critical occasion for him to launch TFC, which he believed would be an effective means to re-connect primary producers in rural areas and consumers in urban centres.

In the TFC magazine, Mr. Takahashi has featured unique farmers and fishing persons (usually men). Farmers usually adopt organic farming, and their produce

³ See <https://tohokutaberu.me/>.

includes rice, vegetables, dairy products and mushrooms, some of which are often avoided by conventional farmers because of cultivation difficulties. Fishing persons can also tell very interesting stories. All of their practices are very illuminating, precisely because they are all fighting against the declining trend; the main driver of economic growth has been changing from agriculture and fishery to industry.

The monthly subscription price is now ¥2580 (about \$23). According to the office of TFC, more than half of the subscription fee goes to producers. There is usually no price negotiation between producers and the TFC office, which signifies that the prices for harvests are comparatively higher than conventional market prices. The rest of the fee remains in the office for handling all sort of administration costs including packaging and shipping. This business model is beneficial for producers, but does not allow a big profit for the TFC office. It would be safe to say that the passion of Mr. Takahashi and colleagues mainly drives for running the TFC regularly.

The number of subscribers is limited to a maximum of 1,500, and by the end of its first year in 2013, the subscribers grew to more than 1,000. Recently it stands at around 1,200. There is roughly an equal number of men and women among the subscribers. Most of their ages are from 30s to 50s. Geographically, about 70–80% are in Tokyo and surrounding areas, but some are in Tohoku, while others are in southern parts of Japan as well. The subscription fees and membership numbers are decided based on the fact that many of the primary producers are small in scale and run by family members who could not meet the large demands that may originate from ordinary marketing channels.

The overall concept behind TFC is interesting. Their vision is, “Read, Eat and be Connected”. “Think with both head and tongue” is also their favourite expression. The TFC's mission is not to spread information about unique and tasty food from Tohoku to urban consumers. Indeed, although the magazine does have some pages of cooking recipes which show how the particular item can be best enjoyed, it tells nothing about taste itself. Instead, the story is all about farming and fishing, which are mostly conducted against harsh natural environments. For instance, organic rice cultivation sounds nice, but it requires huge labour as producers do not apply pesticides and chemicals. The farmers have to do all the manual work. Instead of taste, the TFC focuses on encouraging consumers to understand primary industries through real-life stories of producers. The subscribers who share this reasoning remain as TFC members. Those who prefer to look for tasty food anywhere without sharing the TFC vision are more likely to stop the subscription. In fact, the most common reason for cancelling the subscription is the small amount of food delivered in each issue.

The organizers of TFC prepare various opportunities for mutual interaction between producers and consumers. Often, events are hosted either at places of consumption or production. For example, featured producers join parties attended by consumers in Tokyo. Consumers can also partake in farming activities in Tohoku. In addition, TFC also presents various opportunities for interaction through SNS.

Official TFC subscribers are allowed to log into a designated website in which they can comment on monthly food items. Through these opportunities, the relationship between producers and consumers has become significantly strengthened, although there has not yet been a survey to verify this numerically. For producers, securing limited yet direct access to consumers contributes to better understand their own business. With such enlightened understanding, some producers have become keener to educate the youth about their production, which may ultimately contribute to their marketing and more sales. For consumers, an improved understanding of farming helps them exercise their choice not only benefitting themselves (via healthy diet) but also thinking much bigger issues such as sustainability. Some of them even started to introduce small but real changes in their daily behaviour. For example, some consumers pay more attention to the value of money in their daily shopping as well as to sustainable consumption (Reisch *et al.* 2013). Some informants attested that, through food consumption, they wish to enjoy a good life but also hope that producers would be happy too. These conscious behaviours are precisely what TFC advocates: “Remaking the world is reworking your food”.

As the TFC’s reasoning has increasingly been shared by many in Japan, as of early 2020 there are 37 journal packages of Food Communications (FCs) throughout Japan (out of 47 prefectures)⁴. The way in which FCs are organized varies from one area to another. But, these 37 FCs organize regular league conferences as a forum for information exchange and discussion. Because many of them face similar problems such as how to increase subscribers, the conferences help the FCs resolve their problems. The extent of spreading FCs from Tohoku to other parts of Japan and to Taiwan is also of significance⁵. Even if primary industries are no longer the biggest wealth creator in the aggregated GDP, many people are now grasping their importance. This initiative can open up a new window for social change.

ACCESSING FOOD COMMUNICATION INITIATIVES

The TFC was born in the context of the triple disaster of “3.11” in Japan. Thus, the example may at first appear to be unusual for case study. Nonetheless, structural problems of depopulation and aging in rural communities in Tohoku, Japan started before “3.11” and were accelerated by the disasters. These structural problems were fundamentally caused by deep penetration of market capitalism both at home and globally. This penetration is not limited to Japan alone. The necessity for alternative economic system such as SSE is much needed in Tohoku, Japan and elsewhere (Local Futures 2019). Thus, it is too short-sighted to treat “3.11” problems as isolated issues.

⁴ See also <https://taberu.me/>.

⁵ There are now four similar FCs in Taiwan as well, because Takahashi’s book (2015) was translated into Taiwanese.

TFC clearly demonstrates possibilities of promoting SSE. TFC's most significant achievement derives from their value-driven vision. Previously divided rural producers and urban consumers are now more connected than before. This transformation of relationships is especially important in Japan. Before "3.11", many urban consumers did not understand primary industries very well. In spite of their relative ignorance, many of them insisted on affordable and healthy food. While there had been limited attempts to enhance the mutual understanding between producers and consumers before 2011, they were not very effective. As a result, "3.11" exposed tensions and contradictions of the producer-consumer relations, especially over the radiation issues of agricultural produce in Fukushima. Today, even if all Fukushima produce are proven safe for health, there has been persistent and even increasing ignorance among consumers in general against Fukushima rice and vegetables, which in fact benefits middlemen and shop-managers at the cost of farmers.

TFC has been changing this producer-consumer relationship, and the result has clearly been successful. As conventional economic mechanisms stopped functioning at the time of post-disaster chaos, some of the primary producers started to engage on new experiments. As the TFC has demonstrated, innovation focused on connecting producers and consumers reciprocally, going beyond the profit-maximization inherent to capitalism. Indeed, this sort of interdependence grew and has brought benefits both to producers and consumers. Thus, while the compounded disasters of "3.11" produced new suffering and social exclusion, the disruptions also turned out to be new opportunities for re-embedding previously disconnected producer-consumer relations into wider social settings (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019; Utting 2015).

As already seen, the relationship between rural farmers and urban consumers has grown and mutual trust has been generated. With enhanced mutual understanding, the producers and consumers can now better articulate the multifunctional roles played by the primary industries. They are not just providing food. For healthy food, we need a healthy environment. For prosperous families and households (partly for more promising reproduction), food is more than simply a daily necessity. Families having enjoyable meals originating from producers' personal endeavours, appreciating the blessing of the mother nature, tend to result in better life-satisfaction. Producers and consumers, indeed, become inter-dependent, and thus need to support each other for mutual benefits, which goes beyond simple financial profits. Some have even started to consider such big issues of ill-effects of capitalism more seriously than before (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). Thus, the TFC paves the way for realizing sustainable consumption (Reisch *et al.* 2013). In addition, the relationships generate effects that are social and public nature (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

By participating in TFC activities, both producers and consumers have become more reflective than before. Prior to "3.11", many producers depended on

conventional marketing channels such as producer cooperatives. While there are some exceptional producers – most notably organic farmers – who pursued their own vision of agriculture, many felt more comfortable following the mainstream production and marketing mechanisms. However, this dependence, in reality, also tended to undermine their autonomy. “3.11” stripped them of their comfort, and many of them faced serious survival challenges. The post-disaster crises forced many to consider their future roles. For consumers, whereas they rarely doubted the regulatory standards on health and food operated by the government prior to “3.11”, their confidence was shattered after the severe nuclear accident. Many of them are now compelled to decide what to buy independently using impartial information from non-governmental sources. This situation has propelled some to fall in line with the thinking behind TFC. While there is no shortcut to realize SSE, enhanced reasoning and reflectivity are much welcome. More articulated understanding of agency is indispensable for securing further socio-economic justice and democracy, which are emphasized by SSE and related notions such as neo-endogenous rural development (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019). As a result, although the evidence is still rudimentary, the effects generated by the TFC resonate with what the RIPESS charter has been promoting such as inclusive democracy.

The future of TFC, however, presents serious challenges as well. The achievements of TFC partly derive from the leadership of Mr. Takahashi, who rightly understood that without securing primary industries, our society will seriously deteriorate in years to come. His passion became more apparent due to “3.11”. However, with the passage of time in the post-“3.11” period, many urban consumers are no longer necessarily sympathetic to the disaster victims in Tohoku. In the post-“3.11” period, several other natural disasters occurred, and a significant number of people outside of Fukushima and Tohoku, Japan were affected. The frequent calamities unfortunately equalize different regions within Japan. Once society starts to get used to these incidents, they become normal. Then, with normality, the extent of capitalism can reassert its usual influences. Urban consumers nowadays tend to pay more attention to price signals and may start purchasing daily items without necessarily considering what their purchases may mean for producers whom they hardly know. In return, many producers have to compete with large-scale supermarket chains. This concern is even more highlighted by the injustice in profit sharing over the Fukushima rice; large transactions benefit supermarkets and convenience stores at the cost of farmers. But at least partially this unfairness derives from ignorance of consumers, who in fact buy the Fukushima rice without knowing it. This situation is deeply problematic because of the kind of mutual understanding and trust that initiatives such as TFC have been generating have also been eroded by much more powerful socio-economic forces. Therefore, the real challenge lies ahead of us. Mr. Takahashi said that he is fighting “a losing battle”. Thus, in order for the SSE initiatives to gain more influence to rectify injustice, something more fundamental is clearly needed (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2019).

CONCLUSION

The world now is clearly in the state of unsustainability. Market capitalism is considered as a root cause of inter-related crises, and alternative economy such as SSE is truly needed. The case study of TFC teaches us important lessons. Increased interactions between producers and consumers is very useful for helping both to become more self-reflective, which is much necessary to democratize the mainstream economy that almost exclusively focuses on profit making. Enhanced agency can pave the way for mutually beneficial solidarity economy, which is linked to wider pictures of natural environment, non-monetized activities as well as to political power for re-configuring public authority.

Although the case study of TFC is very interesting, it apparently shows both possibilities and limitations. In order to overcome the shortcomings, TFC and other SSE-minded initiatives need to be supported by more holistic policy frameworks, including information disclosure/dissemination and well-being-oriented economic prosperity. Precisely because the Japanese economy has reached a very high degree of maturity of capitalism, there is little scope in the thinking among both government leaders and key corporate figures that some sort of alternative economic system is necessary in order to make the economy more resilient and sustainable. The “3.11” triple disaster provided a good opportunity to reorient our thinking. But as time passes, and people transit from crises to normality, it becomes more uncertain if there will be a continued incentive for seeking a paradigm shift – a shift such as from market capitalism to SSE. This is the kind of dilemma that Japan now faces.

Therefore, primary industries and rural communities in Japan and in the world are now at a critical juncture. Even though there is no quick fix to the complex issues of socio-economic transformation and sustainability, there are leading examples such as the TFC in Japan that can diversify economic activities beyond price-dictated market transactions. It is therefore important to keep paying attention to these initiatives examining whether they will be able to lead to much broader social movements across Japan and other places in the world undergoing significant structural changes.

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Lumea de azi se confruntă cu o serie de crize, iar mulți observatori au început să realizeze că ceea ce numim capitalism de piață este cauza de fond a acestor crize. Într-un asemenea context, un dezastru triplu a lovit partea de nord-est a Japoniei pe 11 martie 2011. Acea zi de „03.11” a accelerat schimbările structurale pe termen lung ale Japoniei rurale, cum ar fi depopularea. La nouă ani de la dezastru, un semn pozitiv constă în stabilirea unor rețele între producători și consumatori, care acum sunt conectați reciproc. Acest articol acordă atenție îndeosebi unui pachet special de livrări lunare la domiciliu de alimente și produse numit Tohoku Food Communication (TFC), ce își are debutul în iulie 2013. Experiențele TFC pot fi interpretate ca o sămânță fragilă, dar semnificativă de promovare a solidarității sociale, dar și a economiei de solidaritate. Acest articol examinează în mod critic atât capacitățile cât și limitările economiei sociale, care ar putea contribui la construirea societății noastre spre a fi mai sustenabilă decât în prezent.

Cuvinte-cheie: „3.11”; dezastru natural; Tohoku Food Communication (TFC); economie socială și de solidaritate; sustenabilitate.

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