Review article

Institutional Innovation for Youth-Appealing Farming in Japan: An Overview of How European Countries Attract Youth to Agriculture

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Abstract The agricultural sector in several countries in the Western world faces a two-sided problem: the aging of farmers and the shifting of the younger generation toward other sectors. In Japan, this issue is accentuated by the shrinking of the agricultural workforce, as the number of young new farmers has been declining significantly since 2016. Farming is, above all, an entrepreneurial activity, as it requires investment, risk-taking, and management skills. Over the years, Japan has consistently ranked low in terms of youth entrepreneurial intentions. This study suggests that the lack of attractiveness of farming activities to the younger generation is tied to the generally low entrepreneurial orientation of youth in Japan. Considering that European countries succeed in attracting and retaining more youth as agricultural entrepreneurs and workers, this study answers three questions: What are the characteristics of young professionals evolving in agriculture in European countries? What strategies have these countries implemented to attract younger generations to farming? What assets can a country like Japan mobilize to make farming more appealing to its youth? We analyzed the policies and farm business environments in selected European countries where youth are increasingly represented in agriculture. To this end, we followed the PSALSAR methodology to search, appraise, synthesize, analyze, and report the results. Countries included in the overview were France, Germany, Finland, Austria, and Poland. Ultimately, this study discusses how Japan can concretely address this issue to guarantee its future competitiveness and improve its self-sufficiency by attracting young professionals in agriculture. By analyzing the European Common Agricultural Policy (2023-27) and national institutional innovations of selected countries, the review finds that incentives are more effective than financial grants in attracting and retaining young people in farming.

Keywords policy, young farmers, rural areas, internship

INTRODUCTION

In Japan, the depopulation of rural areas caused by the aging population, the youth migration toward big cities, and the low birthrate have been an important socio-economic issue for several decades; however, the Japanese government has always implemented various countermeasures (Dan, 2024). These governmental actions, sometimes supported by private and non-governmental initiatives, have brought significant results, as the country has experienced several significant urban-to-rural in-migrations since 1990 (Mao et al., 2022; Zollet and Qu, 2023). For example, the number of new farmers had tripled by 2015; in 2012, the number of people joining agriculture was 50,800 people in total, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of Japan, including 20 percent of those younger than 39 years old (Kurochkina, 2015).

Scholars from different fields, such as anthropology, rural sociology, and agriculture, within Japan and abroad have conducted a growing number of studies related to "What motivates people (particularly young) to move to rural areas? are also trying to understand their new lifestyle upon settlement in the countryside" (Dan, 2024; Mao et al., 2022; Rosenberger, 2027; Sasaki, 2018, 2017; Zollet and Qu, 2023). People decide to move to rural areas for different reasons, sometimes personal and sometimes circumstantial. Circumstantial reasons include natural disasters, financial crises and pandemics. The most substantial relocations observed in Japan were after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, the Eastern Japan Earthquake (Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster) in 2011, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Ji, 2024; Zollet and Qu, 2023). In addition, a long list of personal reasons may stimulate the decision to resettle in rural areas. These generally include a quest for freedom, living out of the common pressure in urban places (a more straightforward and slower life), being able to be their own bosses, growing their own food, and raising their children properly while experiencing nature (Zollet and Qu, 2023). People moving from urban to rural areas are usually classified into four categories: those returning to their home countryside (identified as U-turns), those resettling in another rural area close to their original home where they have no connection (J-turns), those who originated from urban places that are new to rural life (I- turns), and the grandchild's turn, which refers to those born in cities who decide to go back to their parents origin (Dan, 2024; Kurochkina, 2015). However, all these movements appear to be a constant "in-out" flow as people come and leave; therefore, they cannot sustain life in rural areas (Miserka, 2020). In addition, since 2016, the number of youth (below 49 years old) becoming farmers has been declining significantly, falling below 20,000 for the first time in 2018, with a drop of 7% compared to 2017 (MAFF, 2019). After 2019, post-COVID-19 pandemic, a positive shift has been observed in the number of newly employed farmers and new entries; however, the number of new self-employed farmers continues to decrease significantly along with the total number of newcomers aged 49 years and younger (MAFF, 2023). "Newly employed farmers" are workers hired by farm companies. "New entries" or "new entrants" are people who become farmers on their own; they might take over a family farm, change careers to farming, or use their own money and land to start farming (MAFF, 2005). The main difference is how they start farming: by working for others or by starting their own farm.

Urban-to-rural in-migration led to a new peasantry, (Hisano et al., 2018) described as "what happened in Europe in 2008" based on (Van der Ploeg, 2012) description. Nevertheless, many European countries have succeeded in maintaining their farming workforce in a better shape, particularly the share of youth in the agricultural sector (Van der Ploeg, 2012). Countries such as France, Germany, Finland, Austria, and Poland are remarkably well positioned in terms of the percentage of youth evolving in agriculture, while several other countries from the twenty-seven states of the European Union (EU) have succeeded in increasing their youth's share over the years (Rovný, 2016). What are the characteristics of young professionals evolving in agriculture in these European countries? What strategies have these countries implemented to attract and retain younger generations in farming? What assets can a country like Japan mobilize to make farming more appealing to youth, and what strategies can be used to retain them? These are the questions we propose to answer in this study. As one of the world's top ten agricultural countries, the agricultural sector is crucial to Japan's economy. Therefore, as stated by (MAFF, 2022), "In order for Japanese agriculture to develop sustainably, in addition to needing to secure and retain farmers from younger age groups, each farmer will need to play a larger role." Through an analysis of what has been done in some selected European countries, this paper provides insights into what could be done in Japan as institutional innovation to bring more engaging young farmers into the sector.

OBJECTIVE

The main aim of this study is to propose a framework that Japan can implement to attract and retain more young people in farming. Specifically, the study aims to 1) identify key policies implemented by countries in the EU to attract and retain more youth in farming, 2) determine what Japan can learn from the EU experience, and 3) design and provide a strategy through which Japan can effectively address issues related to farming in rural areas.

Conceptual Framework

This study demonstrates how Japan can innovate in the internship system to enhancing youth interest in farming and rural areas. We hypothesize that better knowledge of rural life and more experience in farming will result in a stronger intention to work or do business in agriculture due to a greater perception of behavioral control and a better attitude toward evolving in farming. The theory of planned behavior, suggested by (Ajzen, 1991), supports this prediction. This approach is illustrated in Fig. 1.

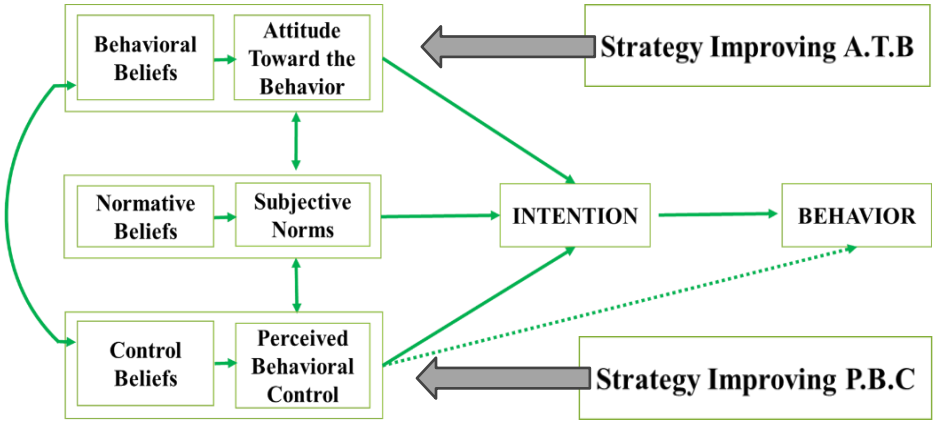

Fig. 1 Framework of the planned behavior theory (*Source: Adapted from Ajzen, 1991*)

METHODOLOGY

This overview examines the literature on Japanese rural evolution and points out key policies implemented in selected countries of the EU in the framework of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP/2023-27, 2023) to support young farmers and make rural areas more attractive. By comparison, we then show all the similarities between related Japanese policies while highlighting what is yet to be done in Japan to have a better impact on the rural world. These EU countries were selected because they succeeded in maintaining or increasing the share of young farmers between 2000 and 2020 (Rovný, 2016). Regarding data selection, a literature survey was performed using trustworthy scientific databases, such as ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Scopus, and MDPI. We used literature published in French, English, and Japanese.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The review revealed that Japan has implemented many policies and programs to make farming and rural areas more appealing to youth (Dan, 2024). However, compared to what is going on in the EU, there is still room for alternative exploration to bring Japan closer to its rural revitalization goal. Table 1 summarizes the key policies, programs, and structures implemented in the EU and describes whether they have been implemented in Japan. These actions are divided into youth support, rural development, and general structures. EU countries are referred to by the following codes: France (FR), Germany (GE), Finland (FI), Austria (AU), and Poland (PO). In addition, key policy points from the EU are extracted from the approved CAP (2023-2027).

The review shows that the Japanese government has done a lot in terms of incentives (subsidies, assistance, and training programs), even more than the EU. The EU and Japan still need to make further adjustments to make rural areas more attractive. Nevertheless, some EU countries currently perform better than Japan. Japan usually considers young farmers until 49 years old and younger; however, in the EU, it is bound to be 39 years old. Based on the latter, youth in Japan account for

only 4.9% of the agricultural workforce (MAFF, 2023), while some EU countries, such as Austria and Poland, account for 10% and 14%, respectively (Rovný, 2016).

Table 1 Strategy for farming and rural development in the EU and in Japan

Policy/Program in the EU	Japanese case	Remarks	Author
Help youth purchasing farmland. Ex: FR. Income support by direct payments to young famer.	Highly performed in Japan	Since 2012, over 43,500 people under 45 have joined the "Young Farmer's Fund." They receive monthly payments totaling about USD 15,000 each year (MAFF, 2017; McGreevy et al., 2018).	(Dan, 2024)
"Provide training and knowledge specifically to young famers in support of generational renewal." Ex: PO	"Support for relocation and financial assistance. paid training programs to learn how to be a farmer for two years."	"Subsidies for childcare, renovation and for house renovation."	(Ji, 2024)
Create off-farm Job in rural areas of all the EU	Limited job opportunities in rural areas.	Less than 40% Japanese young farmers have off- farm job.	(Karahan, 2023)
Vow to improve "essential services such as transportation, communication, healthcare, and education. Ensuring 100% access to fast broadband internet in rural areas."	"Inadequate transportation, and concerns over social integration and educational standards."	For that, some people are passionate about rural areas, but don't want to move there.	(Mao, 2022)
Internship (often long-term) is mandatory in many UE's countries. In FR, GE, FI, AU, and PO it should be performed to have right to a certain degree or diploma.	In Japan, internship is conducted for educational purpose (on a university viewpoint) or for recruitment purpose (on an industry viewpoint).	It's generally not mandatory.	(Kameno, 2023)

In Poland, where the share of youth exceeded 20% in 2020 (WASAW, 2021), making it easier to buy farmland or acquire a farm and facilitating businesses related to agriculture were the most common factors attracting youth to agriculture in 2023 (Statista, 2023). However, the same survey shows that prior to these two factors comes a solid knowledge of the rural world and existing opportunities. Career orientation for teenagers, mandatory internships for students, and exchange programs (Poland-Texas) for young farmers (Agronomist, 2023) are among the structures contributing to boosting the intention of the younger generation toward a farming career.

On-Farm Long-term Internship (OFLI): As a strategy to attract young people to the land, OFLI is a remarkable tool that can be implemented in Japan on a compulsory or even on a mandatory basis, because existing internship runs only for about a week and it is not compulsory. The following are the reasons why it will make a difference in many ways.

Only some students choose to work in rural areas upon graduation, as life there is unknown to them. Traditionally, employment in Japan has been a lifelong commitment. First-starting graduates will only try rural areas with all their stereotypes if they are sure of what awaits them. An internship of 6 to 12 months after graduation will give them the opportunity to make a well-informed decision.

There will be a midterm and a final evaluation of both the apprentice and the farm or firm, with the possibility for the student to try another farm to obtain a complete view. Ultimately, the student may decide to settle in rural areas, either to keep evolving on the same farm as a worker or associate or to start their own agribusiness. Students are also free to move to another kind of job anywhere else. Job hunting consumes a significant amount of time in the final year of many students, to the point that it affects the quality of their research dissertation or even prevents them from graduating. Students will be able to do their job hunting during their internship time, which would be counted as work experience in the future. The apprentice will be paid properly and receive appropriate support for accommodation. Internships have the potential to foster a high level of professional awareness while promoting understanding and attractiveness in certain work environments (Kameno, 2023). As reported by the Kawaijuku (2017) survey, more than hundred thousand students joined agricultural universities in 2017, while the total number of newcomers to agriculture four years later fell by 2.7% (52,000 in 2021) (MAFF, 2023).

Lastly, international students in Japan also represent an important asset to this structure. More than 4,000 international students major in agriculture in Japan (JASSO, 2020). Our ongoing survey on this matter reveals that one out of ten international students would accept a one-year on-farm internship after graduating from a Japanese university.

This program (OFLI) will have a direct impact on perceived behavioral control by enhancing knowledge and understanding of rural life and agriculture. It will challenge subjective norms by fostering a new perspective among the younger generation regarding rural life. Ultimately, it will guide their attitudes toward working and investing in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

This review compares EU countries and Japan's strategies for revitalizing rural areas and attracting young people to the agricultural sector. In terms of age category, young farmer in Japan is not categorize exactly as it is in the EU countries. The results show some similarities between the basic policies implemented to attract and retain youth in agriculture. However, some institutional innovations to make the young generation aware of opportunities and life in rural areas prior to their decision-making will prove more effective than financial grants in attracting and retaining young people in farming. Unlike EU countries, most internships in Japan do not exceed one week, and very few reach three months (Kameno, 2023). The results of this review argue that long-term on-farm internships have the potential to address the generational renewal problem, which is crucial for sustainable food production and competitiveness (Pechova, 2017; CAP/2023–2027, 2023; Borda et al., 2023; Lollini, 2021). Nevertheless, considering that the education system in Japan differs from that in European countries regarding how and when students should decide on their future careers, additional studies are needed to determine the propensity of young Japanese people to welcome such institutional novelties.

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