

The prospect of social and solidarity economy (SSE) now possibly emerging in  
the post disaster affected areas of Tohoku, Japan

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Abstract\*

The world has undergone a series of economic crises, and many observers started to realize that the root cause of these crises is market capitalism. In such context, the Triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant accident hit north-eastern part of Japan, Tohoku, on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2011. The 3.11 has accelerated the long-term structural changes of rural Japan. After six years since the disasters, one positive sign that has been emerging in disaster-affected Tohoku is that there are some networks of producers and consumers who are now reciprocally connected. This paper particularly pays attention to a new monthly delivery package of magazine and food together called, Tohoku Food Communication (TFC), whose first issue was released in July 2013. The experiences of TFC and its associated activities 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 rural societies more resilient and sustainable than before.

1. Introduction

Since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th Century, humanity has been endeavoring to achieve 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 realization was

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not without costs. Continuous economic expansion was enabled by increasing consumption of often non-renewable energy and resources. It is no surprise that the extent of suffering of the Earth has become so apparent recently, particularly in respect of climate change.

Under these circumstances, many analysts started to identify that the root causes of our problem is our “addiction to economic growth” (Latouche 2009). It has been increasingly realized that in order to resolve the current crises, we need a genuine paradigm shift: economic growth can no longer deliver prosperity to much of the humanity. We really need alternative economic systems that can supplement the dominant capitalism. In this sort of plural(ist) economy, not only the environmental conditions of our planet can be improved, but global economy as a whole can also become more resilient (Laville 2007).

One promising candidate for such 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 as essential information. In globalized market economies, producers and consumers usually do not know each other, and their economic autonomy is significantly curtailed.

In contrast, in the SSE, producers and consumers are connected with each other through exchanges of goods and services that each appreciates. Often, they know each other well. Their reciprocal relationship is based on mutual trust and enhances respective autonomous capabilities. As a result, their economic relationship starts to demonstrate “public nature” (Utting 2015). SSE is the economy embedded in particular social contexts, and attempts to overcome our obsession with profits and efficiency. This is what Karl Polanyi was paying due attention to years ago (Polanyi 1944).

This paper uses case study of Tohoku, Japan, which was hit by the Eastern Japan Great Earthquake on 11 March, 2011. After six years since then, there have been noticeable progress on rebuilding infrastructure. However, rebuilding local communities have been facing daunting challenges. In the recovery and rebuilding processes of disaster-affected areas, there are interesting examples of new economic activities that were uncommon prior to 2011. In some of these new activities, novel networks between producers and consumers are now formed. Some networks are formed through agricultural cooperatives and others are promoted by coordinated support for promoting

renewable energy. This paper particularly pays attention to a new monthly delivery package of magazine and food together called, Tohoku Food Communication (TFC), whose issue was released in July 2013. The TFC, as well as other examples, can be interpreted as emerging cases of SSE. While these new endeavors are still very fragile, it has been encouraging to see such economic innovation. Although it is still too early to make definite conclusion whether the new seeds of SSE will bear good fruits in the years to come, it definitely deserves much attention. I would argue that these pioneering examples demonstrate that SSE can be useful in post-disaster Japanese economy. However, in order for such new attempts to be really successful, it is necessary for the government and society as a whole to support SSE activities so that the economy can become more plural than before, instead of being monolithic – an economy only dominated by market capitalism.

## 2. Crises of Modern Capitalism

Since the Industrial Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the humanity has been endeavoring to achieve modern industrial society. Industrialization processes allowed economies grew, and jobs were created. The pursuit of modern society brought prosperity in the Northern hemisphere. People in Europe and North America on average now enjoy much prolonged life expectancy, for instance, than the time prior to the Industrial Revolution. In these countries, the general living conditions came to be much improved as well. This European experience has convinced the world that same sort of prosperity can be spread globally. Especially since the end of World War II, developmentalism has become a global passion. It was hoped that economic growth would create more jobs, and income would rise for the majority of population. Thus, it was expected that people will no longer suffer from pervasive poverty. The industrialized countries, which were first benefitted from economic growth, started to provide aid to developing countries so that the latter group of countries can also enjoy the benefits of economic prosperity (Rist 2014).

Yet, achieving economic growth was not without costs. In many of the industrialized countries in the North, rapid economic growth was made possible by unprecedented use of energy and materials, many of which were not

renewable. Thus, the continuous economic expansion and concomitant use of Earth's precious resources were two sides of the same coin. Indeed, in many industrialized countries, rapid economic growth was accompanied by serious environmental degradation and public health issues. Their experiences led to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 in Stockholm, which was the first global Conference of this kind, and a new UN body to look after environment was subsequently created. However, human exploitation of Earth's resources remained unabated. According to global footprint analysis, the level of environmental burdens already surpassed what the Earth can endure around 1970. In other words, in the last 40 years or so, humanity has been demanding more than what our mother Earth can renew and regenerate (WWF 2016, p75).

This evidence forces us to rethink our familiar economic logic. In modern capitalism, it is conventionally understood that more production, better life. This is because the bigger economy, the more production, and more prosperity. Thus, it is the economy in which mass production, mass consumption and mass disposal are linked with each other. Therefore, policy makers, particularly at times of recession, have strived to expand production. Such quantitative expansion has been measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Policy makers have thus been very keen to know whether GDP was growing or contracting. Constant economic growth has almost become a political obsession, because unless economy keeps expanding, incumbent political leaders face serious difficulties of reelection. However, since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fallacies of modern capitalism have become more obvious than before. GDP is an aggregation of all productions; it not only includes "goods" but also "bads" such as pollutants (Spence 2009).

In addition, modern capitalism not only poses serious environmental risks but also inevitably creates a cycle of bubble and burst. There has been increasing discussions about how to make economies more resilient to shocks and instabilities. Furthermore, in the conventional market capitalism, people are encouraged to sell more and buy more. Yet, in reasonably mature economies, more stuff does not necessarily mean more life-satisfaction. Thus, economic logic seriously deviates from genuine feeling of and happiness. Indeed, the more income does not necessarily mean more happiness either once it reaches a certain level (Jackson 2016).

Therefore, many analysts came to think that time is ripe to seek alternative economic mechanisms that can supplement market capitalism. One promising possibility is social and solidarity economy (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 signal, as competitions through markets result in arriving appropriate prices. Therefore, there is a wide division between producers and consumers. In market economies, their economic autonomy is significantly curtailed, but often the stakeholders do not realize such limitation.

In contrast, in the 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 stories that both producers and consumers highly appreciate. Often, consumers are willing to participate in processes of production with producers, because such participation enables both of them to make production more useful and effective. This co-production process enhances respective autonomous capabilities. As a result, their economic relationship starts to demonstrate “public nature.” It is often argued that SSE is more environment-ally friendly (UN TFSSE 2014; UNRISD 2016). With the mutually trusted relationship between producers and consumers, mass production only for the sake of making more stuff does not have to take place. Life-satisfaction and happiness can also be improved through the SSE as each goods and services reflect what one really values. Often people appreciate being a part of human network as urban consumers often suffer from social exclusion (Utting 2015).

Some of the early ideas of SSE are already in the work of Karl Polanyi (Polanyi, 1944). As more ideas and practices of SSE have grown, SSE has gained wider acceptance both among academics and practitioners than before (CIRIEC et al 2015). More recently, a famous RIPESS charter emphasized the following values as their core ideals:

Humanism	Subsidiarity
Democracy	Diversity
Solidarity	Creativity
Inclusiveness	Sustainable development

Equality, equity and justice for all  
Respecting the integration of countries  
and people, and

A plural and solidarity-based economy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.ripess.org>.

### 3. 3.11 as Triple Disasters

The afternoon of March 11, 2011 was cold, and it was snowing in most of the northern Japan. A mega earthquake of magnitude 9.0, the most powerful in the history of disaster-prone Japan, hit the eastern coast of Tohoku region. About 30 minutes later, more than 650 km along the Pacific Coast of Tohoku was hit by an unprecedented scale of tsunami (tidal wave). The tsunami was considered to be about 10-meter high. In some places, it traveled as far as 15 km inland, and it even reached about 40 meters high. The Tsunami inundated more than 550 km<sup>2</sup>. These natural disasters also triggered nuclear power accident in Fukushima Prefecture. Three nuclear reactors of Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (the First Nuclear Power Plant in Fukushima) operated by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) reached level-7 meltdown without much delay. The nuclear accident is one of the most serious in human history. While earthquake and tsunami were natural disasters, the nuclear power plant accident was clearly man-made. TEPCO made a fatal error by not paying due attention to secure backup power sources to cool the plant in case of serious accident, even though this is the area where a large-scale Tsunami devastated previously in 1896, for instance. Thus, “3.11” or the Great East Japan Earthquake Disaster (GEJED) is now widely known as triple disasters (Birmingham and McNeill 2012).

The affected area was widespread, but the casualties and damages were concentrated in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima Prefectures. In 2014, The death toll was nearly 20,000. The number of wounded was more than 6,000. Those who were still missing were about 2,600. The number of houses totally damaged was more than 120,000. If we include partial damages, then the number increased into the magnitude of one million. As 3.11 was also the nuclear accident, the wide areas surrounding the power plant were contaminated, and the evacuees from these areas both voluntarily and involuntarily were numerous. Even as in the late 2014, more than 55,000 people were still on “temporary” evacuation from the three prefectures (Bacon and Hobson 2014).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The information bulletin number 150 of the Fire Defense Agency (2014).

3.11 undoubtedly affected Tohoku in many different ways. While proportionately the share of Tohoku in the national GDP was less than 10% prior to 3.11, the region was still important for primary industries of agriculture and fisheries. The areas in Tohoku continued to supply not only food and natural resources but human resources as well to Tokyo, all of which were especially needed for rapid economic growth in Tokyo and its surrounding areas since the 1960s. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that Tohoku served as a kind of colony to the Tokyo metropolitan area. Within the unequal relationship between Tohoku and the capital, Tokyo and cities were considered more sophisticated and superior than rural areas of Tohoku. Indeed, one can say that the extent of capitalism development in Japan have reached its full maturity over the last 150 years, during which imperialism, war and domestic colonization were all employed (Shinoda 2013).

This background has further inscribed important psychological effects on the minds of people. It has created a mindset in which primary industries are not attractive as good jobs for young people. Even if primary industries, particularly in Tohoku, have been very important, the youth has tended to look for office jobs in cities. For youngsters in Tohoku, white color jobs in Tokyo appeared more appealing than remaining at home and succeeding farming or fishing from their parents. Indeed, if the youth decides to be fishermen, they were ridiculed as “going to fridge” (Takahashi 2016). This was the situation of primary industries in Tohoku before the disasters.

Tohoku before 3.11, therefore, already started to suffer from serious socio-economic illnesses. As the primary industries could no longer attract the youth, those who remained in Tohoku was mainly elderly. It is precisely the senior people who were bearing the burden of tough labor in the primary industries; in many instances, once they stopped their business, there would be little prospect that next generation will carry it forward. Depopulation and aging were more than a demographic phenomenon. Rather they had serious implications for political, economic, and social aspects.

As the share of primary industries declined, apparently there are some industrialization taking place in Tohoku particularly in the last two decades as well. IT and precision machinery became important industries, as they started to supply key parts to internationally famous brand such as Apple before the disasters. However, the problem is that they were not well connected to



wide-spread and more indigenous medium- and small-scale industries, which were largely food processing (e.g. fishcake and other seafood items), sake brewing, and other productions making use of harvests from land and sea. Thus, primary industries and its associated processing factories on the one hand and high-tech industries of IT and precision machinery on the other hand, in the pre-311 period, demonstrated a sort of dual economy, in which each serves different clients and do not constitute circular economy in locality.

3.11 accelerated the trends in many ways. Due to the compounded disasters, many lives were lost and houses were damaged. Jobs were lost as well, and it has not been far from easy to reestablish many of business activities. The problems that became already apparent before 3.11 become even more serious in the post disasters period (Bacon and Hobson 2014: 198).

This is the context in which recovery and reconstruction have been pursued. Unsurprisingly, immediately after the 3.11, the central government emphasized recovery of high-tech industries as they were to supply key parts internationally. The government was afraid of blocking the global supply chain for a prolonged period of time. Thus, the government quickly prepared and implemented a policy package to encourage these industries to resume operations. On the other hand, a window of assistance for numerous small-scale indigenous factories was very limited. This limitation frustrated many of small-scale business owners, many of which were family-based.

In this region, radiation issue made the matter worse. The fear of radiation put many people in deep anxiety whether they can continue living in Tohoku. More specifically, farming and fishing were banned shortly after the nuclear power plant accident, as health effects due to radiation was very uncertain. In Fukushima prefecture in particular, a government order was given in that all agricultural cultivation in 2011 was stopped. Many primary producers lost their sources of income. But their income losses were not compensated by the government. It is because the official government view was that the government would assist the victims but is not concerned with income and wealth of individuals. The government justified its position that in market economy, each stakeholder is responsible for his or her acts, and no government tax can be used to supplement income or wealth (e.g. rebuilding individually owned housing) even in cases of severe natural disasters.

The government economic policy, together with other actions,

understandably had big political impacts on Japan (Pilling 2014). After 3.11, it soon became apparent that the public trust on government has significantly reduced. The distrust largely originated from the ways in which the government disclosed important information, especially in relation to radiation released by the troubled nuclear power plant. Examples to support this claim are numerous. For instance, while the government had a sophisticated nation-wide radiation monitoring system, the gathered information was never used effectively to guide the victims who were on urgent evacuation from Fukushima. In fact, quite a few of them sought shelter in areas which were badly contaminated by radiation without knowing it. If this key information was timely released, they could have avoided such second effect. It is no surprise that 3.11 seriously damaged the public trust on government. The turnover of power from the then ruling party to opposition took place in December 2012.

This distrust led to revitalize civic political movements (Fukushima Booklet Committee 2016). Although there may be different interpretations about it, it would be safe to say that it is significant that the public protest came back in Japan in a renewed fashion. When the Abe government (formed in December 2012) pushed for certain agenda, it started to invite significant public protests on streets in Tokyo and other places. Such phenomenon in Japan was visible in the 1960s when the US-Japan Security Treaty received a massive public criticism. Old people who were on streets in protesting against government policy were back in chanting the message such as “no resumption of nuclear power plant,” or “no change of information dissemination policy.” The young people also joined them even if this was their first time to be on streets making themselves known to the public (Hasegawa 2014).

3.11 has been thus having multiple effects on Japan. Against the background of increasing public distrust on the government, and energized civil society, the overall economic philosophy has remained intact, that is more or less typically neo-liberal. This is precisely why the Tokyo government has been reluctant to aid the 3.11 victims when it comes to individual income and wealth. It may therefore not be a pure coincidence that among the efforts unfolding on 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 the mainstream market neoliberal capitalism. Although 3.11 affected the whole economy, 3.11 fundamentally affected the ways in

which primary industries were perceived among urban consumers, as illustrated by the example of Tohoku Food Communication.

#### 4. Tohoku Food Communication

Tohoku Food Communication (TFC) is a novel monthly delivery of magazine and food, first of which was issued in July 2013, about two years after the 3.11. The TFC was started by Mr. Hiroyuki Takahashi, who were born and raised in rural Tohoku but attended a college and worked in Tokyo for several years. Upon returning home, He was serving as a lawmaker for prefectural assembly and were eager to rejuvenate prime industries in Tohoku before 3.11 (Takahashi 2016).<sup>3</sup>

In the TFC magazine, Mr. Takahashi have featured very unique primary producers, including both farmers and fishermen. In cases of farmers, they usually adopt organic farming, and produce included rice, vegetables, dairy products, and mushrooms, some of which were often avoided by conventional farmers because of difficulties in cultivation and/or unsuitable for marketing. For fishermen, they can also tell very unique and interesting stories in fishing activities. Their stories are all very illuminating, precisely because all of them fight against the tide in which primary industries have been in long decline as the Japanese economy as a whole has been significantly been industrialized.

The package includes limited amount of food produced by the persons who appeared in the magazine of the same issue. The monthly subscription price started with ¥1980 (about \$ 17) initially, but was revised to ¥2580 (about \$23) since February 2016. The number of subscribers is limited to 1500 as maximum, and by the end of first year of 2013, the subscribers grew more than 1000. The recent number is around 1200. Both men and women are roughly equally found among members. Most of their age is from the 30s to the 50s. Geographically, about 70 to 80 percent are in Tokyo and surrounding areas, but some are in Sendai (the largest city in northern Japan) and Tohoku, and others are in southern parts of Japan as well. These numbers of fee and subscribers were derived as many of primary producers featured in TFC are small in scale

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<sup>3</sup> Personal interview, 22 August 2017 in his office.

and run by family members, and they cannot meet with large demand if it is marketed ordinarily. The most popular reason of those who stop subscription is the small amount of food delivered in each issue.

The overall concept behind the TFC is interesting. They call their vision as, “Read, Eat, and be Connected.” “Think with both head and tongue” is also their favorite expression. These phrases present their ideas very well. The TFC is not to spread information about unique and tasty food from Tohoku to urban consumers. Indeed, although the magazine has some pages of cooking recipes in which the particular item can be best enjoyed, it tells nothing about taste itself. Instead, the main story is all about farming and fishing, many of which are conducted against harsh natural climate. For instance, organic rice cultivation sounds nice, but it is an extremely laborious farming as producers do not apply pesticides and chemicals. The farmers have to pull of weeds manually. Instead of telling how tasty each item is, TFC focuses on encouraging consumers to learn what primary industries are all about by reading real life stories of producers.

The organizers of TFC prepare various opportunities for mutual interaction between producers and consumers. Often, events are hosted either in consuming or producing places. For example, featured producers join parties attended by consumers in Tokyo. For producers, these parties present rare opportunities to understand reactions of consumers. In other instances, consumers partake in some farming activities together on farms as well. In case of rice cultivation, it can be planting and harvesting. These opportunities help both producers and consumers to understand their respective views. In addition, the TFC also presents opportunities of various interactions through SNS. Once becoming a subscriber of TFC, one is allowed to log into a closed network in which he/she is allowed to comment on monthly food items. Often, consumers express that by preparing a meal according to the recipe, he/she made an amazing dish that he/she never imagined before. Of course, this sort of posting pleases producers. There is also a different network among producers in order to exchange opinions about common concerns over agriculture, fishing and other issues. Through these occasions, it is considered that the link between producers and consumers have become strengthened, although there have not

been survey to verify this numerically.<sup>4</sup> The TFC thus thinks “remaking the world is reworking on your food.”

This emphasis on relationship is especially important in Japan. Before the 3.11 many of the urban consumers in Japan did not know primary industries very well. But many of them insisted on affordable and healthy food. While there have been some limited attempts to enhance mutual understanding between producers and consumers before 2011, they have not been very effective. As a result, there have been limited mutual trust between producers and consumers. The lack of reciprocal respect became very apparent due to the radiation issues of agricultural produce in Fukushima. Effective risk communication presupposes mutual respect among stakeholders, as messages should be well understood in two ways not just one way. Unfortunately, this was not the case between producers and consumers over the primary industries in Japan before the 3.11. Thus, once the government banned all Fukushima agricultural produce to be distributed to supermarkets and other stores, even if the level of radiation became significantly reduced subsequently and proven to be negligible for health hazards, many consumers who used to purchase Fukushima produce before 3.11 rarely came back to repurchase it (Hamada et al 2015).

What TFC is attempting to achieve is to go beyond this limitation that became so apparent due to 3.11 and Fukushima nuclear power accident. By telling fascinating struggles that producers face in farming and fishing, the consumers are educated to “think with both their head and tongue.” In fact, many of the subscribers think that their understanding of agriculture and primary industries have become much better than before.

As a result of their efforts, the number of sympathizers have gradually increased. What is impressive is that currently there are 38 similar Food Communication (FC) initiatives throughout the country (there are 45 prefectures in Japan).<sup>5</sup> The way in which FC is conducted varies from one area to another. The subscription price varies slightly from one place to another. Also, in some cases FC is monthly but in other places, it is bimonthly. Furthermore, the organizers of FC include diverse actors such as information and media entities, restaurants and hotels, and associations who have been supporting farmers.

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<sup>4</sup> Several interviews of the organizers as well as a Community Manager of TFC in August 2017.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://taberu.me/league>.

These 38 organizers of FC organize league conferences as well as a forum of information exchange and discussions. Because many of them face a similar problem such as how to increase subscribers, these conferences and forums help the FCs to ease their problems. The extent of spreading the FC from Tohoku to other parts of Japan and to other countries is of significance. (Indeed, there will shortly a similar FC in Taiwan as well, because Takashi (2015) was translated into Taiwanese.) Even if primary industries is no longer prime in the Japanese economy, many people are now realizing its importance than before. This, together with long and noticeable tendency of people returning from urban to rural areas,<sup>6</sup> can open up a new type of window for social change.

## 5. A New Initiative of Community Supported Agriculture

The organizers of TFC also started a new initiative of community supported agriculture (CSA), which is provided by an affiliated NPO of Tohoku Kaikon. Currently there are seven producers who are listed on the website.<sup>7</sup> Out of seven, two are fishermen. The system of CSA is roughly as follows: the subscribers pay monthly fee (prices vary depending on the commodities), and they receive certain amount of produce. The subscribers can also participate in several events together with producers. In the case of rice and vegetables, the members participate in planting and harvesting, and receive produce once they are harvested. If the items are seafood, they are invited to their fishing towns and villages on several key occasions, and receive food packages twice a year. The number of subscribers depend on producers, but it appears that there are five to 15 subscribers in each producer. (But in case if there is a direct purchase agreement outside of this CSA, it is very difficult to know the exact number of partners.) The TFC office provides the platform with which various transactions are made. What is perhaps unique is community managers (CM). They play a mediating role between producers and consumers, as some of the producers may not be very comfortable in handing electronic correspondence, for example. In addition, it was interesting to note that one community manager

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<sup>6</sup> See a series of books published by Association of Rural Culture (農山漁村文化協会) in <http://www.ruralnet.or.jp/>.

<sup>7</sup> The names are found in <https://tohokutaberu.me/csa/>.

stated that since rural people are hesitant to say “no” to some pressing requests, CM can play a mediation role in easing communication between producers and consumers (Chart).<sup>8</sup> As a result of these arrangements, the community encompassing both consumers and mangers support producers.

However, the subscription price is expensive, even if they are invited to participate in key events which are hardly available if one is not a member. Thus, unless the subscribers understand the package as a whole as a good attempt to reinvigorate primary industries as an indispensable basis for sustainable society, one would opt not to choose to be a member of the CSA agreement.

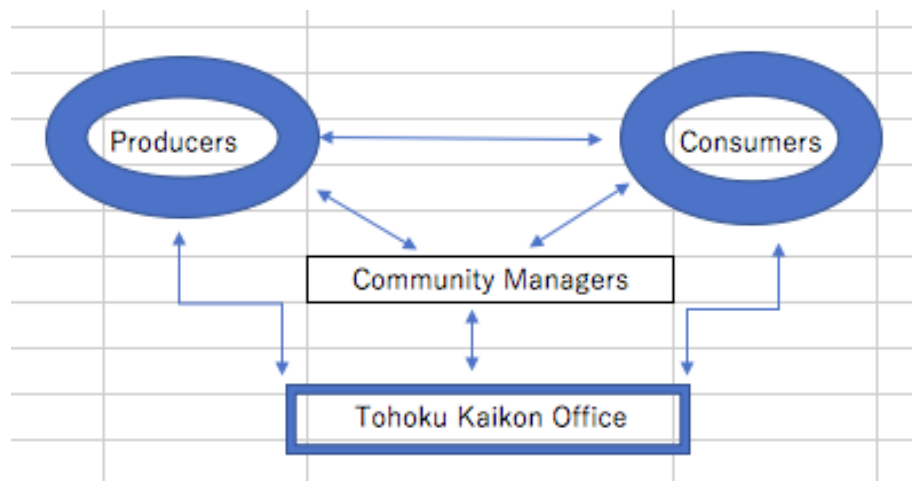


Figure 1 Structure of Community Supported Agriculture (Drawn by the author)

One producer who is passionate about CSA is Mr. Katuhiko Isezaki, rice growing farmer in Tono city, Iwate Prefecture<sup>9</sup>. He was one of the two rice growing farmers who appeared in the October 2013 issue of TFC. The city of Tono is located in the mountainous area of Iwate, northern Japan. On the occasion of 3.11, this place became the key basis to send people and materials to rescue widespread tsunami-affected coastal areas, as it was about hour and a half to travel to several towns and cities along the coast.

The city of Tono is also well-known as a place of folktales. *The legends of Tono* is a collection of fascinating old folktales, collected by Mr. Kizen Sasaki, a local writer, and compiled by Mr. Kunio Yanagita (1875 - 1962), often considered as the founder of folklore studies of Japan. The first publication in

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview, 31 August 2017 in Tokyo.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://tohokutaberu.me/csa/isezaki/>.

Japanese was released in 1910, and the first English translation was published in 1975 (Yanagita 2008). The numerous folktales were born in rural areas of northern Japan. As they are usually so in other places, the folktales convey sometimes happy but other times sad stories. Many of them were born out of close interactions between people and nature, which was in old days outside of human control. People feared and respected nature. As Tono is well known for its old folktales, there are several interesting museums in the city, where visitors readily grasp an important message from the old world: In the old Tono, people then were not economically rich, but was enjoying a high-degree of happiness by living together with nature instead of trying to controlling it with human knowledge. The legends, that have been handed over from generation to generation, convey an important message to us today; for us who live in the world of modernity and science, what is eternal truth at all?

Mr. Isezaki and his wife consider that if they would engage in agriculture in this area,<sup>10</sup> it has to be sustainable. Agriculture needs to bring some sort of basic economic prosperity, and its produce have to feed people. Nonetheless, if agriculture damages ecological system itself, it is not sustainable. In his view, conventional modern agriculture, which is much dependent on wide use of chemicals and machines, is unsustainable. It circumvents the natural flows of ecosystems. This is not something that he should do for his children and grandchildren. He is deeply committed to his vision of sustainable Tono, which is graphically depicted in the following figures. As illustrated by these drawings, sustainability is attained by realizing circular society in which humans and other lives depend on each other. Circularity is supported by well-functioning ecosystem. Thus, his vision of rice cultivation is not to enrich him and his family alone. He firmly believes that agriculture is not just a production of food, but it needs to play more important social role in preserving nature and culture and handing them over to next generations. For such purposes, local people need to have much wider perspectives about wealth, happiness and prosperity. As such, CSA supporters around him are easily charmed by his ideas and practices. Even if his CSA rice price is very high, there are about 20 members who pay such price. The payment is made out of sympathy to his ideas and ideals.

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<sup>10</sup> Personal interview, 21-22 August 2017, at his home.





Figure 2 Images of Sustainable Life  
(drawn by Mr. Isezaki and colleagues and the pictures were taken by the author)

## 6. Accessing Food Communication Initiatives

How then can we assess the performance of TFC and its associated activities? On the one hand, there are several positive achievements. The TFC have so far received several prestigious awards, including Good Design Award in 2014 and Regenerating Locality Award in 2017.<sup>11</sup> More fundamentally, the most significant achievement derives from their value-driven vision (Sato and Takaura 2015). Previously divided primary producers in rural areas and consumers in urban centers are now being connected. Relations between primary producers and consumers were negligible before 3.11, and now this relation is becoming closer and more visible than before. Through these connections, their mutual understanding has grown steadily among. This change helps stakeholders to engage on co-production, including CSA. With better understanding of each other, producers and consumers can now strive

<sup>11</sup> All those awards are in <http://taberu.me/post/news/prize>.

for primary industries which not only play the role of food production but also fulfill other important functions of sustainability with much longer time horizon. While it is by far not easy to induce behavior change on both sides of producers and consumers, significant proportion of those who are engaged the TFC and its affiliated activities are now thinking about primary production and sustainability more seriously than before. Some of them even started to introduce small but real changes in their daily behaviors. For example, some producers have become keener to educate the youth about their production. Some consumers are paying more attention to value of money in their daily shopping as well as to sustainable consumption.<sup>12</sup>

Through increased interactions between producers and consumers, each is regaining its respective autonomy (Nitagai and Yoshihara 2015). Prior to 3.11, many of the producers depended on wide-spread mechanisms of producer cooperatives and national policies. While there are some exceptional producers such as organic farmers who pursued his/her vision of agriculture, many producers felt comfortable in following the mainstream primary production policies and mechanisms. But, this dependence, in reality, also tended to undermine their autonomy. The crises of 3.11 strip them of the comfort, and many of them faced serious challenges for survival. The crises forced many producers to consider their future role. Some started to sell their produce directly to consumers through the Internet, for instance. For consumers, whereas they rarely doubted regulatory standards operated by the government on health and food prior to 3.11, their confidence was shattered due to the radiation issue of 3.11 nuclear power plant accident. Many of them are now compelled to decide what once is to buy independently using information from non-governmental sources. This situation has propelled some to go in line with the thinking behind the TFC.

Accordingly, the number of subscribers of TFC increased since its inception in 2013. It has recently been around 1200 instead of their desired maximum of 1500. But this gap can be explained by those who “graduate from the TFC.” Some subscribers who quit the membership explained that he/she has now gained good understanding of primary production, he/she would like to give this very valuable opportunity for somebody else who are like

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<sup>12</sup> Personal interviews, August 2017.

himself/herself before. Being a member of the TFC has been such fantastic, so it would be a pity if he/she monopolizes this opportunity by remaining as a member for a long time. Indeed, as the FC activities spread from Tohoku to other parts of Japan, some changed the membership from that of Tohoku to his/her local ones. Others shifted to be a member of CSA only without maintaining a TFC membership. Thus, it would be safe to conclude that the total number of those who are sympathetic to the fundamental idea of TFC has become slowly but steadily increased since its inception (Takahashi 2016).

On the other hand, the prospect of TFC and its associated activities to take deep roots in Japan is far from easy. The achievements of TFC partly derive from the conviction as well as the leadership of Mr. Takahashi, who rightly understood that without securing the primary industries, our society will face serious decay in years to come. And his passion became more apparent due to the triple disasters of 3.11. So, as in other cases of serious social reform, crises provided a good opportunity for rethinking. However, as time passes by in the post 3.11 period, many urban consumers are not necessarily show sympathy to the disaster victims in Tohoku. In the post 3.11 period, several other natural disasters took place and significant people were affected in Japan. Once society regain 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 not necessarily considering what their purchase may mean for producers whom they never know easily. In this sense, the real challenge is lying ahead of us. Mr. Takahashi, the founder of TFC, said that he feels that he is fighting “a battle of withdrawal.”<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the activities such as TFC has its own structural problems. By design, the scale of activities is small, and unable to produce scale merit unlike the case of conventional merchandize trade. Thus, the subscription prices for TFC and CSA are expensive. As a result, potential membership can be limited to those who can afford to pay the expensive fee. One Food Communication organizer explained that they are targeting people with regular income in the age of 30s as they are the ones who started to think seriously about what one really wishes to purchase.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mr. Takahashi also understand that the structural problems that he and his colleagues face are similar to those of fair trade. Personal interview on 22 August 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview on 4 July 2017, in Kyoto.

If one values inclusiveness and equity seriously as criteria for SSE, as shown earlier, this structural issue is very serious. Setting the relatively high price can inhibit those who are agreeable to the idea from really participating in the TFC and its affiliated activities. It appears that the judgement depends on how we form assessment criteria. While some tend to judge more stringently,<sup>15</sup> it may be too critical to blame the TFC and its affiliated activities not in line with the ideas and practices of SSE, given the circumstances in contemporary Japan. It would deem appropriate to conclude that the TFC is still a fragile and potentially important seed. Nurturing the seed in the years to come is, therefore, more important instead of dismissing them immediately.

This issue brings us back to a bigger picture. In order for the seeds of SSE to grow, it would be desirable if government policies become more supportive, as in other countries where SSE has recently been thriving. But precisely because Japan has reached high degree of maturity in mainstream capitalism, there is little scope in thinking both among government leaders and private entrepreneurs that some sort of alternative economic system is necessary in order to make economy more resilient and sustainable. The 3.11 as triple disasters provided the good opportunity for reorient our thinking. But as time passes by, people move from crises to normality, and then it has becoming more uncertain if there will be a continued incentive for designing a very big social change such as SSE. This is a kind of dilemma that Japan in post 3.11 faces.

## 7. Conclusion

When the TFC activities started, the time was still ripe for forging relations between producers and consumers as people were generally supportive to disaster victims in northern Japan. However, as time passes by, people do not always pay attention to disasters and its consequences. 3.11 may be fading away. Thus, whether the initial success of the Tohoku Food Communication (TFC) will be sustained in the years to come is a real challenge.

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<sup>15</sup> One key person of RIPPSS representative in Tokyo, Japan expressed that the TFC activities are good but do not meet the RIPPSS criterion if we take them seriously. Personal interview, 31 August 2017, Tokyo.

On the one hand, there are some reasons for optimism. First, as founder Mr. Takahashi has a clear and big vision, his vision has been soliciting sympathy of those among rural producers and urban consumers. As the structural issue of depopulation and decay of rural communities continue to deepen in the near future, it is likely that his vision will continue attracting attention of a number of circles. His idea is not about food production only. It also relates to big ideas such as transforming the relations between the capital and the rural areas, as well as shifting unequal to equal relationship among social groups within modernity.

On the other hand, precisely as his overall orientation is against the mainstream political and economic views, it remains a big challenge whether the spreading FC networks to different parts of Japan and indeed to Taiwan shortly will provide a solid basis on which contemporary capitalism can be seriously challenged. This is a serious dilemma. Public confidence on the government has declined in post 3.11 period. Yet it is the government which design and implement essential policies. For the maturing of SSE in Japan, support is probably needed. But there has been little scope among government officials as well as entrepreneurs of large-scale private corporations in which some sort of alternative to or supplementary mechanism of capitalism is desirable and/or necessary.

The TFC has been an innovative SSE that was born in the disaster context of Tohoku, Japan in the post 3.11 era. Whether that innovation can spread to much a larger scale and whether the mainstream political-economic system may adapt some elements of it for our better future, it is far from easy to make any definite judgment yet. It is therefore very important for us to keep a close eye on the TFC and the like-minded grassroots endeavors.

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