



MODERN PROBLEMS IN EDUCATION AND THEIR SCIENTIFIC
SOLUTIONS

REGIONAL REVITALIZATION POLICY AND
ENTREPRENEURIAL HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN JAPAN:
LESSONS FROM 26 YEARS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Abstract. Japan's own assessment of ten years of regional revitalization finds that the development of those who carry the region was insufficiently addressed. Why, then, did government not develop them? Drawing on the author's twenty-six years in Yamagata Prefecture, seven in personnel and staff development and three in start-up support, this paper compares the prefecture's staff development system with what entrepreneurial human resource development requires. Governmental instruments operate only within a relationship of command and presuppose objectives that can be defined in advance. The developmental function must therefore be placed outside government, with universities foremost among the recipients.

Keywords: policy instruments, regional revitalization, entrepreneurial human resource development, local government, public administration, staff development, Japan

Introduction

In 2014 Japan launched regional revitalization in response to population decline and the concentration of people in Tokyo. Under the Act on Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan (Act No. 136 of 2014), a national strategy was adopted by the Cabinet that December, and prefectures and municipalities were required to prepare local strategies and manage them by key performance indicators (Cabinet Secretariat, 2025).

Ten years later the Japanese government assessed its own policy. The Basic Concept for Regional Revitalization 2.0, adopted by the Cabinet on 13 June 2025, lists the points to be reflected upon. One is that strategic measures on fundamental matters, including the development of those who carry the region, were not sufficiently taken. Another is that local governments outsourced most of the drafting of their strategies and did not always work on them as parties with a sense of ownership (Cabinet Secretariat, 2025). It was not measures that were lacking, but those who would use them.

The diagnosis is easier to read through the theory of policy instruments. The resources a government can mobilize, classified as nodality, authority, treasure and organization (Hood, 1983), each presuppose that an actor already exists to use them. A government can pay a subsidy; it cannot pay out the will to apply for one.

Hence the question of this paper. If the constraint was people, why did government not develop them itself? Japanese prefectures maintain basic policies for staff development and





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operate structured training systems, yet that methodology did not travel outward to the region. The paper sets the author's twenty-six years in Yamagata Prefecture, Japan, seven in personnel and staff development and three in start-up support, against published documents. Its limits are those of a single prefecture and of a participant's account; individual projects are analyzed separately.

Main Part

Where the policy arrived

In Yamagata Prefecture the Third Comprehensive Development Plan of 2010 and the Fourth of 2020 framed policy, and the latter-term implementation plan of March 2025 also serves as the prefectural strategy under the Act (Yamagata Prefecture, 2025). Plans were continuous, indicators were set, and progress was verified each year.

The population nonetheless continued to fall. In the Population Census of 2000, the year the author entered the prefectural government, Yamagata had 1,244,147 residents (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2001). The preliminary count of the 2025 Census gives 993,127, down 7.0 per cent from 2020; every municipality lost population, and the Mogami area in the north of the prefecture declined by 10.9 per cent (Yamagata Prefecture, 2026). About one fifth of the population was lost over the twenty-six years.

What was missing was neither plans nor money. In the start-up support post the author held from 2022, about 200 million yen of a national grant was secured for new businesses using XR technology; funds could be obtained if one set out to obtain them. The government's own assessment notes that regional revitalization grants were mainly sectionalized, stand-alone and small in scale (Cabinet Secretariat, 2025). The institutional apparatus grew finer while the receiving side grew thinner.

Government does know how to develop people

Under its basic policy for staff development, Yamagata Prefecture takes presence in the field, the perspective of residents and emphasis on dialogue as the three attitudes essential for its officials. Collaboration with diverse actors is a stated priority of training, and the official it aims at is one who does not fear change and takes on difficult issues with speed. These aims are pursued through compulsory training by grade, elective courses and secondment (Yamagata Prefecture, n.d.). They correspond almost exactly to the qualities asked of those who carry a region: government did not fail to know which qualities were required.

The author took part in designing and operating this system, in the personnel division from 2009 and in the staff development center from 2011. Two experiences serve as material here.

The first is a program for changing the consciousness of officials. Earlier programs had been transmitted downward from above, and this one was designed as their antithesis. Each workplace discussed and decided for itself what was needed to make the workplace open, and then carried it out. The premise was that people do not move, and results do not follow, unless they take the matter as their own.





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The second is the construction of the personnel evaluation system. Evaluation had been invisible, and it was made visible as an institution. Core competencies and management by objectives (Drucker, 1954) were introduced, and evaluation from multiple directions was deliberately not adopted.

What the first shows is that the principle that a sense of ownership cannot be conferred but must be held by the person was already institutionalized inside the prefectural government in 2009. The point the Japanese government raised about regions in 2025 had been treated within the organization more than fifteen years earlier.

What prevents transfer

The methodology nonetheless did not leave the organization. The reason lies not in capability but in the range within which the instruments operate. Four differences may be noted.

First, the presence or absence of a relationship of command. Basic training is compulsory, and attendance is established as an order of duty. Modern bureaucracy is constituted by hierarchical command (Weber, 1978), and the developmental instruments of government operate only within that range. Government cannot order those in the region to attend.

Second, whether the objective can be defined in advance. Management by objectives sets objectives at the start of a period and measures attainment at its end, presupposing that the objective can be written down (Drucker, 1954). Starting something new, however, includes the search for what the objective should be, and an objective that cannot be defined cannot be managed.

Third, the place of failure. In the developmental institutions of government results connect to evaluation, whereas start-up support assumes that many attempts will fail. The author examined about 150 applications for start-up subsidies over three years. Those that did not continue after selection shared a feature: the business plan carried no figures, and the structure of revenue was not made concrete. Screening cannot remove such cases entirely, and stronger screening reduces the volume of attempts. An institution premised on evaluation cannot hold this contradiction.

Fourth, the mode of learning. Some grow through skills acquired in classroom training, others through interaction in the field. Development inside government is built around the former and holds no device for the latter, yet those who grow in entrepreneurship are mostly of the latter type. Those observed to grow shared a self-confidence grounded in evidence, an optimism that accepts the outcome, and a readiness to take advice and act on it, none of which is transmitted by lecture.

In sum, human resource development in government fits those in a relationship of command to duties already defined, whereas developing those who carry a region requires setting in motion undefined action by people outside that relationship. The instruments of the former cannot be applied to the latter, and the developmental function can only be placed outside government.





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Conclusion

This paper asked why regional revitalization policy in Japan turned toward entrepreneurial human resource development. The answer lies in the limits of policy instruments: the resources government mobilizes presuppose actors rather than supply them, and the developmental instruments it holds operate only within the reach of command.

Three implications follow. First, the result of policy should be measured by the number and quality of those who carry the work, not by the number of projects; project counts move with the injection of funds in the short term, while people do not. Second, the developmental function should be designed on the premise that it lies outside government. Achieving public purposes through third parties is no exception in contemporary governance (Salamon, 2002), and universities are foremost among such bodies here; government confines itself to supplying funds and legitimacy. This is a division of labor, not a withdrawal.

Third, this division is tested most severely where start-up support is state-led. Where support for entrepreneurship is institutionalized as national policy by presidential decree, the range the state can set in motion is wider than in Japan. But a large infrastructural power of the state (Mann, 1984) does not mean that the domain outside command disappears. The greater the degree to which the state initiates, the larger the question of where the function of development is to be placed.

The limits of this paper are those of a single prefecture and a single career. Comparison across prefectures and follow-up evaluation of externalized developmental functions remain for future work.

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