A Case Study of Intergenerational Exchanges as an Innovation Model for the Reduction of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Multiple Generations in Japan

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Abstract
Since Japan’s population has been aging at an unprecedented speed recently, the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan set up an office to develop countermeasures against isolation and loneliness in 2021. However, while existing studies discuss various interventions for those problems, only some interventions are shown to improve feelings of social isolation, and whether or not these interventions are similarly effective across different ages is still vague. In addition, few studies discuss community-based interventions with the participation of multiple generations to deal with loneliness and social isolation.

Existing studies on community farms have yet to extensively discuss their effects on social isolation and loneliness across different ages. This can neglect the potential roles of this activity as a salve to those problems, especially in countries like Japan with high rates of aging and low birthrates. Furthermore, the participation of international students in community farming is considered a rare activity and needs to be delineated beyond existing research.

This article describes the SDGs11 Connect Aomori Yokouchi Project in Aomori City, Japan. The article aims to discuss its potential as an innovation model for further research and practice on reducing social isolation and loneliness in multiple generations in Japan and other countries. In this project, international and Japanese students use vacant farmland to grow flowers and vegetables as community farms. Residents of every age (very young children, elementary school students, adults, and the elderly) are eligible to participate in this activity. This activity attempts to promote exchange between generations, to regenerate and foster connections among people, and to help encourage young people to settle down and contribute something to their community. As a result, it contributes to reducing or preventing feelings of isolation and loneliness through the mutual exchange of the participants, students and older residents.

Keywords: social isolation, loneliness, multiple generations, SDGs11, community farm, intergenerational exchanges

1. Introduction
In recent years, Japan’s population has been aging at an unprecedented speed. In contrast to the aging population of 28.9% in 2021 in Japan (Cabinet Office, 2021a), Aomori Prefecture has a much higher percentage of aged people (from 65 years old) than the average in Japan, which was 34.3% in 2021 (Cabinet Office, 2021b). Furthermore, the number of elderly people living alone (hereafter referred to as “elderly living alone”) was 15% in males and 22.1% in females in 2021 (Cabinet Office, 2021c). Partly due to the Corona crisis that began in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019, there are concerns that the problems of isolation and loneliness have become more severe, with a disruption in personal connections and an increase in the number of older adults living alone (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022). Therefore, in February 2021, the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan set up an office to develop countermeasures against isolation and loneliness.

The “Basic Survey on People’s Ties,” a survey of 20,000 people conducted by The Cabinet Secretariat Office for
Policy on Loneliness and Isolation in 2022, with 11,218 valid responses showed that 37.9% of 1,914 people aged 60 to 69, 31.2% of 2,110 people aged 70-79, 31.2% of 1,110 people aged 80-89 answered “often/always”, “sometimes” and “occasionally” to the question concerning their feelings of loneliness. (Note 1) Based on the results, it has been proposed that social policies be enhanced and strengthened according to particular stages of life. This proposal includes all age groups and applies to foreign residents of Japan and Japanese citizens.

In the background of the emphasis on “connection”, natural disasters such as the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995 and the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of 2011 remain in the public consciousness. Amid the destruction and the suffering they caused, there was a bright spot, a heightened awareness of the importance of connections between people. The government has now stated that connecting with others is essential as a countermeasure against isolation and loneliness. Policies have been implemented to help resolve the problem of isolation and loneliness and to improve people’s general sense of well-being (Cabinet Secretariat, 2022).

To explore this issue further, this article is organized as follows. This paper examines existing studies on the reduction of social isolation and loneliness. Then, the paper studies the case of intergenerational exchanges as a potential innovative model for dealing with social isolation and loneliness. The last section discusses the practical and academic contributions of the case and points out further research tasks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Existing Studies on the Community Farm

Community farms are discussed in some studies in Japan with the roles of spaces leisure, tourism, or social connectedness. However, there are still few studies discussing the roles of community farms in the reduction of social isolation and loneliness. For example, Kikuchi (2019) regarded an ample farming area within or near a city as both production and consumption space. Production space is for agricultural production, while farmland as a consumer space is introduced as a community garden emphasizing leisure space, not for commercial purposes but for recreational and welfare purposes. Kikuchi (2019) suggested that in all rural tourism that takes place in farming villages, it is necessary to have a mechanism that allows visitors to use attractive sites in farming villages at their own pace, based on maps included in tourist guides. Yadorihara and Inokura (2020) introduced a case of local community education-related joint-use in the Ono district of Tarumizu City, Kagoshima Prefecture, which provides students with farming experience, lodging, and interaction with residents. Nakayama and Nishikata (2009) illustrated kindergarten children participating in food and agriculture education farms at the Bunkyo Food and Agriculture Education Farm. Sakurai (2016) emphasized the significance of the farm’s existence in multi-generational exchanges for university students. Konno (2021) described part-time farm jobs that match students with farmers in order to supplement the current labor shortage in agriculture due to the aging population in recent years.

On the other hand, local governments and not-for-profit organizations in Japan have made many efforts to deal with the problem of isolation and loneliness. The “SDGs11 Connect Aomori Yokouchi Project” (abbreviated as the “Yokouchi Project”) case is one of the initiatives. It was developed by the student support team of the Yokouchi District Community Development Council of Aomori Chuo Junior College’s Infant Education Department to contribute to the Goal 11 of The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). While SDGs outline 17 general goals and 169 specific targets to be achieved by 2030 in 193 countries, Goal 11 is to “make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable”. The project members raised many flowers, processed them into pressed flowers, and delivered them to older people living alone in the local area. Students did not simply hand over these gifts but engaged the elderly in conversation as much as possible. Saito, Kanahira & Nguyen (2023) discussed the case of Yokouchi Project in comparison with other activities of community farms in Japan but hardly gave a full description of all activities and thorough consideration of the case’s practical and academic contributions to the problem of isolation and loneliness not only in Japan but in other countries. Furthermore, the effects of the community farm on dealing with social isolation and loneliness across different age spectra are not discussed extensively in existing studies. This can neglect the potential roles of this activity as a salve to those problems, especially in countries like Japan, with a high rate of aging and a low birthrate. Furthermore, the participation of international students in community farming is considered a rare activity and is not delineated in existing research.

2.2 Existing Studies on the Reduction of Social Isolation and Loneliness

Loneliness refers to the situation of a person subjectively often feeling alone, while social isolation refers to a lack of social relationships (de Jong, 1987). Kabayama et al. (2014), examining factors contributing to healthy longevity in Japan, introduced the role of public health nurses in long-term care projects in the community. Pepper,
a humanoid robot manufactured by SoftBank Robotics, is expected to help compensate for the shortage of personnel in long-term care nursing and rehabilitative care (Tanioka et al., 2018). Tanioka et al. (2018) discussed legal issues when implementing a preventative care program for older adults using Pepper alone, without the intervention of human care workers. In addition, they considered potential safety issues in robot performance and environmental settings to help ensure safe and valuable rehabilitative healthcare practices for the elderly.

Social enterprises are also discussed in dealing with social isolation and loneliness in rural communities, where rural community members play essential roles in delivering services of social enterprises (Kelly et al., 2019).

Williams et al. (2021) searched six electronic databases to identify studies of interventions for loneliness and/or social isolation. Effective interventions for loneliness included psychological therapies, educational programs, animal therapy interventions, and leisure development. However, few interventions were still shown to improve feelings of social isolation. Whether or not these interventions are similarly effective across different ages is still vague.

Few studies discuss community-based interventions with the participation of multiple generations (including children, students, international students, and older adults) to deal with loneliness and social isolation.

3. Case Study

The authors studied the activities of the Yokouchi Project mentioned above in 2022, which involved more participants from Aomori Chuo Gakuin University and the Aomori Chuo Gakuin University Graduate School, including international students from Vietnam, Thailand, China, and Malaysia. All generations of residents (very young children, elementary school students, adults, and older people) were eligible to participate in this circle activity. They used vacant farmland to grow flowers and vegetables at Community Farm Yokouchi (hereafter, Yokouchi Farm). Community farms can be seen as places to grow flowers and vegetables for local people, to harvest and prepare food, and to interact with multiple generations at the table, enjoying the rewards of their joint efforts.

This activity attempts to promote exchange between generations, regenerates and fosters connections among people, and helps encourage young people to settle down and contribute something to their community. As a result, it contributes to preventing isolation and loneliness. Therefore, it passed an approval process and was adopted as a 2022 Aomori Field Study Project supported by the Aomori City Government.

The Yokouchi neighborhood of Aomori City has an area of 1,400 square meters. The implementation period of the project in 2022 was from May to November, and the program consisted of ten activities. The average number of participants per session was 18.

No. 1: Field maintenance, signboard creation

Participants mixed fertilizer into the soil to plant summer vegetables and made ridges. International students created the signboard written in Japanese, English, and Chinese in Yokouchi Farm with residents. This was the beginning of international exchanges at Yokouchi Farm.

No. 2: Field maintenance, flower planting

Students worked together to plant summer vegetables, cold-tolerant herbs, and broom grass (known as kochia). Kochia has been introduced in the media as a plant that can help revitalize towns and tourism. The circle raised 130 seedlings from 3 kochia seeds donated by an elderly local woman (89 years old). This woman remembered that her grandmother had used kochia from her garden to make brooms when she was a child, and she wanted to try this herself, so she set about gardening. Kochia used to be an essential part of life for the elderly, making things at home, but now there is little sense of this among the younger generation. Nowadays, when robots are used to clean up after ourselves, learning how to make a simple broom is a way of passing down lifestyle knowledge from the past. Therefore, kochia is a suitable means of interaction between generations.

What was common to all the activities of this program was that although the participants had never met before, they could open up to each other naturally soon after meeting. They naturally taught one another and cooperated through weeding, gardening, and cooking. Exchanges were born, transcending differences in generations, countries, and languages. All of the participants reported that it was fun and that they would like to participate again.

No. 3: Field maintenance, “Minna no Shokudo” – Meat dishes using herbs

“Minna no Shokudo”, (Everyone’s dining room), is a co-eating place where local volunteer groups regularly provide inexpensive, nutritionally balanced meals. Participants ate rosemary and pork grown on the community
farm together. At a time when there were few opportunities to eat together with friends due to the influence of the new coronavirus, the outdoor location provided an opportunity for people to eat together.

No. 4: Field maintenance, “Minna no Shokudo” – Italian stewed dishes using herbs

Participants prepared an Italian stew made of various vegetables stewed in water and seasoned with oregano herbs and salt. The participants enjoyed the stewed herb dish, which they had never tasted before.

No. 5: Yokouchi Autumn Nebuta “Minna no Shokudo” – Pumpkin Soup with Coconut Milk

Nebuta are the very large, colorful, traditional floats depicting a range of well-known characters, paraded through the streets of downtown Aomori each summer during the famous, week-long Nebuta Festival. The Yokouchi Nebuta in the local neighborhood started in 2012. In recent years it had been suspended due to the impact of the pandemic, the increased burden on individuals, and the aging of the Nebuta-float craftspeople. However, in 2022, the “Yokouchi Autumn Nebuta” event became an opportunity for local people to gather. Thanks to the efforts of the Yokouchi Community Development Council, residents living in the Yokouchi area, Japanese students, and international students attending universities there, the participants were very excited to get it going again.

The participation of international students from various countries (Vietnam, Thailand, and China) and Japanese students contributed to multi-generational and international exchanges. It was a valuable experience that allowed them to feel Japanese culture firsthand.

To enliven the Yokouchi Autumn Nebuta Festival, students (including international students), university teachers, and members of the town social welfare council were invited to “Minna no Shokudo” (Everyone’s dining room), for about 200 people at the starting point of the Nebuta (Jofukuin Temple). In this project, eighteen high school students worked together to prepare the food. For the menu, an international student from Thailand served a Thai dessert, pumpkin soup with coconut milk, with an authentic taste from home. Having many people participate in the Nebuta parade and jointly providing the venue and food was natural for a multi-generational and international exchange, and the atmosphere was fun.

No. 6: Field maintenance, planting flowers, making lavender bath salts

Residents of a nursing home for the elderly and local elderly people planted flowers together. Since it was difficult to go out for a long time due to the influence of the new coronavirus infection, the participants said, “I am happy.” They also made a bath salt by mixing the harvested lavender and Epsom salt in a mortar.

No. 7: Minna no Shokudo – “Let us get to know Vietnam”

This program has promoted various local activities with residents at community farms. Among them, international students held “Minna no Shokudo”, where international students take the initiative in presenting the Vietnamese cuisine pho, using coriander harvested from the community farm, and “Let us get to know Vietnam” as a cross-cultural exchange.

A similar exchange event was held in which participants were taught how to make pho, a typical Vietnamese dish, by exchange students studying at Aomori Chuo Gakuin University, who had brought the ingredients with them from Vietnam. There were 30 participants (small kids, elementary school students, young people, international students, and older adults). As part of this event, those students planned a cross-cultural quiz competition tackled by everyone from elementary school students to older people. Again, it was an opportunity to learn from each other about our cultural differences. At first, the participants seemed nervous. Still, by teaching each other vocabulary and simple sentences, creating original business cards written in various languages, discussing quiz questions, and cooperating in answering them, they quickly became friendly and advanced their language understanding.

No. 8: Field maintenance, “Minna no Shokudo” Italian stewed dishes using herbs

This was like the No. 4 activity.

No. 9: Harvesting Pickled Vegetables, “Tsukemono Grand Prix” and “Flower Group Planting”

Chinese cabbage, red turnips, and radishes were harvested, and recipes for tsukemono (pickled vegetables) from elderly people in the area were learned, compiled, and distributed to participants. In addition, local elderly people made group plantings of flowers that bloomed in spring and spread them to those who could not participate.

No. 10: Kochia Transplantation

Kochia, grown on the community farm, was transplanted to a local park. This park was regenerated as a community garden Yokouchi through collaboration between the university and the local community at the same time as this activity.
4. Consideration

4.1 Practical Contribution

Regarding gardening activities, Yoshinaga et al. (2022) also verified the effect of *ikebana* (flower arrangement) on preventing or slowing the deterioration of dementia and reducing the degree of nursing care required. Since dementia and the burdens of nursing care for the aged are increasingly severe social problems, it will be essential to turn to gardening and flower arrangement as non-drug intervention methods. Furthermore, it has been reported in recent years that horticultural activities within green spaces on hospital premises positively impact patient rehabilitation.

*Tolerance of Diversity/Strength*

Participants in the project enjoyed their visits to a farming environment. They could naturally interact with the locals and with students who participated in the event without concern about language barriers. In addition, weeding and harvesting on Mother Earth contributed significantly to a sense of well-being. From this, the project members now think of possibly establishing a permanent workcation site (a place to spend the vacation while working remotely) for urban people.

For example, a Chinese family with one 2-year-old child, coming up from Tokyo, participated in a workcation in Aomori City. International students who can use English, Chinese, and Japanese helped them with translation. The Chinese parents let their child come into contact with the soil and nature. In the end, the 2-year-old said, “Weeding was fun!” The study of Arai et al. (2022) revealed the effects of a short-term workcation on the psychology of urban workers. Touching the soil and breathing in nature in this project was thought to bring about stress relief naturally.

At the “Minna no Shokudo”, people cooked and ate the harvested food or brought it home. Here, international students prepared menus with their countries’ specialties. They served Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese food. Working on the community farm and actively preparing and serving food to others has become a pathway for international students to demonstrate their strengths, to reduce loneliness, and to increase self-esteem while pursuing their studies in Japan. Cooking freshly harvested produce on the spot and dining together allows participants to recognize each other honestly.

*Less isolation and loneliness*

One of the problems facing many modern students is communicating when meeting other people for the first time. Repeated interaction between local and international students in this circle, participating in such endeavors as growing flowers and vegetables with older adults, reduces their feelings of social weakness. Furthermore, it has been reported that interacting with the younger generation in the community helps reduce elderly resistance to younger caregivers. Simultaneously it is conceivable that international and local students feel a greater sense of attachment to the community by being treated kindly while interacting with the older local adults. As a result, the younger generation may become better established in the community.

“I was surprised at how well they grew any vegetables. I felt young because I could interact with Chinese students and other students. I tried some food from a different culture that I do not typically eat, and it was incredibly delicious. If there is an opportunity, I would like to participate again,” reported an older participant (Saito, 2023: 8)

It has been verified in numerous studies that the risk of isolation is high particularly for older men living alone. Therefore, in this program, older men (including older men living alone) naturally gathered together in the final stages, and these men often invited female acquaintances to participate. As a result, a large number of female participants subsequently joined in.

*Participation of multiple generations in the solutions*

Though Japan has high aging rates and low birthrates, there has been a rise in the number of international students in Japan. There were about 170,000 students entering Japan by student visa in 2022, (Note 2) and there were over 231,146 international students in Japan. (Note 3) Japan aims to have 400,000 international students by 2033. The case discussed above showed that students and international students played an important role in planning and implementing multi-generational and international exchanges. Therefore, the model is expected to replicate in other areas to attract more students and international students in creating solutions to the issues of social isolation and loneliness, not for old people but also for the students themselves.
4.2 Academic Contribution

While there are few studies of multiple generations in community farm activities and the effects of community farmwork in dealing with loneliness and social isolation, this paper has examined how the Yokouchi project has contributed to mitigating isolation and loneliness through the social exchanges of participants of different ages. Multi-generational exchanges are thought to alleviate loneliness. In addition, some participating students are international students, a rare feature that allows for unique multinational exchanges. The participation of older men living alone, who are known to be more likely to become isolated, promotes a healthy connectedness. The continuation of this project is expected to act as a salve to alleviate loneliness.

This case has gone some distance in filling the above-mentioned academic gaps while showing that multiple generations can successfully interact in a community farm setting featuring cultural exchange. Therefore, the case can be regarded as an innovation model for dealing with problems of loneliness and social isolation.

5. Conclusion

The significance of community farm activities described in this study comes under the rubrics of health, regional revitalization, healing of the mind, self-sufficiency, connection with people, diversity, and interest in plants. The Yokouchi project promotes social contribution and better communication, and reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness for multiple generations. It is thought that it also contributes to the United Nations SDGs 11, helping to make cities “inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.” Further research is needed to discuss the possibilities of developing this model to deal with feelings of social isolation and loneliness in the community, expanding it to other regions in Japan and to other countries.

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Ethical Statement

This research was conducted after obtaining oral consent from the participants regarding the content of the research and the handling of personal information. We explained that all information would be anonymous and would not be used for purposes other than research, and that it would not be related to student grades, and consent was obtained.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

References


Notes


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