

My Visit to the U.S.

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I visited the U.S. for the first time through the *Resilient and Vibrant Rural Communities* project. I have only been abroad a few times and was looking forward to learning about life in rural areas in another country. I can easily find out what is happening in other rural areas in Japan, but I have little information on what is happening abroad.

I live in the rural town of Tono, Iwate, which has a population of 28,000. I encourage prospective entrepreneurs to move to the area—entrepreneurs who are interested in solving issues on the ground—and help them grow their work. I decided to participate in the program as I thought I would learn about new ways to think about my own work. How do I encourage prospective entrepreneurs in urban areas to move to the region? How do I nurture them? How can their work positively impact the local area?



We visited several regions and organizations in the U.S. We were introduced to their work and had opportunities for discussions while reflecting on the work we do back home. As I expected, I learned new perspectives on building and expanding organizations, and observed the mindsets and viewpoints of the leaders we met. I learned a lot and became aware of something important: I realized that people who work in rural areas are all similar no matter what country they are from, but the way they look at and solve issues can be quite different.



In regard to the similarities, I felt a kinship towards the American entrepreneurs. We work in a similar environment and tackle similar problems, including a lot of trial and error. We seem to worry about the same things and feel happy about same things. That's probably why I felt the kinship. In Japan, when I meet people working in rural areas, even when I meet them for the first time, I instantly feel a kinship and a sense of solidarity. I felt the same way with the

American entrepreneurs I met. That should not come as a surprise, but I was simply happy to meet like-minded people in a foreign land.

The other thing that I became aware of is that the issues that rural areas in Japan and the U.S. face are similar, however, the way the Japanese and the Americans tackle them is different. In Japan, policy is set to encourage urbanites to move to regions where they have no affiliation. On the other hand, the U.S. is focused on how to encourage locals who left for urban areas to return to where they grew up. Measures to encourage locals who moved away to return to their hometowns are advanced in the U.S., and there are survey tools to track where the locals have moved and what kind of work they are doing. I also found out about an app that was being developed to encourage people who left their hometowns to return. I have never encountered these types of efforts in Japan, and it is something that I can incorporate in the work that I do back at home.

On my end, I think I would like to share with the Americans what we do to encourage people to move to rural areas where they have no affiliation. One advantage of having outsiders is that they can look at local resources and problems with fresh perspectives. The other advantage is the ability to move things forward as outsiders and not get caught up in local dynamics. Sometimes it's easier not to have strong local ties. In my work, most prospective entrepreneurs in Tono are from other parts of Japan, and they have been able to breathe fresh life into the region. It is important to encourage the influx of outsiders and returnees to create diversity in the region. I think that will reinvigorate the community and create fertile ground for creative thinking as communities tackle local challenges.

To promote inbound migration, you have not only to make the case for how attractive the region is, but also find ways to identify projects that use local resources or address local challenges. Then, you need to make it easy for prospective entrepreneurs to see the potential and opportunities. This will give them a sense that there is a path for self-fulfillment and encourage them to take on new challenges.

This spring, something happened that made me happy. Jamie Horter, an artist whom we met in Lyons, Nebraska, came all the way to Tono to visit us. She said she wanted to see our work, and we had a chance to introduce our work to her. We are also exploring ways to implement a [project](#) she started in Lyons in our hometown. We connected her with an entrepreneur who is interested in working with her. We might not be able to do this right away, but we will stay in touch and somehow realize this project.



When you compare the U.S. and Japan, there are differences in the historical backgrounds and geographical environments of urban and rural areas. However, we are tackling the same issues. I believe that there is so much that we can learn from each other and there are many ways to work together. By having a sense of camaraderie, opportunities to learn from each other's

work, and implementing projects together, we can engender new ideas and thinking. I don't expect things to go smoothly from the beginning, but the point is to stay in touch and coordinate as we go. After the Americans complete their visit to Japan this fall, I would like to explore ways to move things forward while keeping in mind how these types of exchanges and collaborations can have a positive impact on the work we all do.