

## Resilient and Vibrant Rural Communities 2018

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I came to the Resilient and Vibrant Rural Communities Exchange carrying a couple of different perspectives. Driven by the goal of creating rural jobs and capturing more consumer dollars in rural communities, I've worked for a number of years on marketing and distributing local food products -- specifically by operating Refresh Appalachia and Farmtable Delivery food hubs, conducting research on food hubs and advising a food hub working group. As the founding Director of the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition and contracted campaign director with the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition, I have also worked on policy advocacy to support rural development and to ensure that the growth of our rural economies benefits those who are unemployed or living in poverty. Through these experiences I've seen that our success in developing rural economies, and in lifting up the rural poor, depends on voters, businesses and politicians agreeing that society should invest in building up rural people and places.

Thus, when with Japan Society generously invited me to participate in an exchange of rural innovators, I brought along my economic development brain – my curiosity about how Japanese are branding and marketing rural communities, attracting young people, using technology to make market connections, and building supply chains that capture more value for primary producers. I also brought my policy advocacy brain – my desire to understand how Japanese rural innovators are shaping public discourse and policy around rural prosperity for all people.

The Japan trip caused me to see that the economic project of building rural enterprises can be accomplished in tandem with the political project of creating shared goals and understandings between rural and urban communities. I was deeply impacted by this. Although I am an urban person living in a pretty rural place, and although much of my work has been to bring rural agricultural products into cities, I had previously never thought about how to use economic development work to heal the rural-urban divide in my own country. The trip has made me think about it a great deal more.



When we visited the Chori Fishery Co-op in Iwate, we learned how the 2011 tsunami transformed urban consumers, who knew of the co-op from buying their seafood at the supermarket, into energetic volunteers and advocates who helped rebuild the co-op's infrastructure after the tsunami. We saw how the Co-op continued to build upon this volunteerism by creating a "fan club" membership program which brought consumers into a sustained relationship with

the fishing community. Now the Co-op has a large group of urban “fans” who not only buy the co-op’s products regularly, but also visit the fishermen regularly and feel invested in the town’s future. This goodwill will hopefully translate into more volunteer and financial support as other needs arise, and an overall political will to invest in places like Koishihama Fishery Harbor.



In Joetsu we saw a different, but related “fan club” model. Members of Kamiéchigo Yamazato Fan Club contribute regularly to fund the twelve functions considered by the Fan Club to be essential to rural vibrancy, from cultural festivals to eldercare. We learned about Fan Club founder Tsuyoshi Sekihara’s proposal of the Rice Covenant, a tacit agreement between urban and rural people surrounding rice production. According to the Rice Covenant, rural people serve the needs of urban people by providing guaranteed access to



rice, disclosure about pesticides used to produce the rice, the opportunity to participate in cultural traditions related to rice production, and more. In return, urban people serve the needs of rural places not only by buying rice, but also by investing in and remaining active participants in rural communities. Forecasting the future, Sekihara-San suggests that urbanites must preserve rural communities not only because they provide food and other benefits, but also because they could become a necessary safe haven in case of earthquakes or tsunamis that could disable urban infrastructure. I found his message about urban-rural mutual interdependence to be very compelling.



Finally, from the FoundingBase project in Tsuwano and the NextCommons Lab project in Tono, we learned about Japan’s Community Re-Activating Coordinator Squad program, which provides basic income payments

to young entrepreneurs who choose to relocate to rural areas. This program builds rural-urban relationships by importing talented people into rural places. Seeing how NextCommons Lab had brought in a cadre of energetic young people who were making their way in Tono society, I was reminded of the transformational impact of the AmeriCorps program in Mullens, West Virginia. Mullens is a small mountain town that has received many AmeriCorps service members from more urbanized areas, and many of them have stayed and even married in the area. Although West Virginians are sometimes mistrustful of outsiders, the people of Mullens have become accustomed over time to the presence of AmeriCorps members, who help to normalize the idea of



rural and urban people interacting with each other in creative, productive ways. As a result, Mullens is a more welcoming community with a vibrant community center, a 4H program, a community gardening program, and many other assets that nearby towns lack. NextCommons Lab caused me to think of the replicability of this sort of phenomenon, of using league or fellowships programs to build a cultural precedent for collaboration between rural locals and outsiders.

I took home three main ideas from our exchange:

First, rural and urban communities are mutually interdependent, and developing a strong public discourse about this is very important for rural survival. All the programs we visited were intentional in their messaging and storytelling about rural-urban interdependence. I liked this as a contrast to the divisive narratives we more often hear in the United States, regarding “culture wars,” rural backwardness, and irreconcilable political differences between rural and urban places.



Second, direct economic transactions between rural and urban people provide a useful context for relationship-building and mutual understanding. Thus, the economic project of marketing rural products can be unified with the political project of reminding urban people that rural places are important. From my experiences in West Virginia I’ve already seen how farmers markets can unite traditional residents and newcomers in a town, but the “fan club” model allows consumers and producers to build unity across distance, which is very powerful.

Third, we need to think more about programs that attract young talent to rural areas. Such programs are a great way to build a culture of rural innovation while strengthening rural-urban relationships. They may be especially effective when they place young people in clusters in the same rural area, or connect them with a “cohort” of individuals who are doing similar work.



What we witnessed in Japan is particularly important as we think about the question of national unity in the United States. U.S. politics have become increasingly polarized in the past few years, and many have pointed to the rural-urban political divide as the root cause. Some attribute the divide to differences in rural and urban values – for example the tendency of rural communities to value religion and tradition, while urban areas value diversity and innovation.

Contributing to the problem of geographic division, demographic data shows that individuals are continuing to move (intentionally or unintentionally) to places where other residents share their own political views. Too often, we seem to end up in debates about whose values are right or wrong, rather than discussing why we need each other. As rural and urban politicians

in the U.S. become increasingly unable to agree on effective policies, we would do well to notice how rural innovators in Japan are helping rural and urban people to better understand each other.

Broad economic inequality between some rural and urban areas in the U.S. also plays into rural resentment of urbanites. Rapid urban growth (made possible by cheap food, materials and electricity) often happens at a cost to rural places, which suffer the social and environmental consequences of mass production and resource extraction, but are unable to retain the profits in their poorly capitalized local economies. Urban communities sometimes fail to understand the burden that rural places bear on their behalf. Bringing urbanites into sustained, meaningful repeat-visit relationships with rural places – relationships that extend beyond tourism into volunteerism and financial support – could help build an understanding of the responsibility that urban has to rural. I have seen examples of this in my own life, of friends and family members who came to see rural places differently by visiting them often, but I never thought about it as a tool for political change.



Moving forward, I see myself thinking more creatively about how to connect my work in Appalachia to urban people outside of Appalachia. I plan to talk with the food hub I started at Refresh Appalachia (now branded as Turnrow) about how the “fan club” model could help engage more financial and community support from outside the region. I also would like to explore the “fan club” model as a way to fund fellowships for anti-hunger advocates who have personally experienced poverty and hunger.

Regarding the future of the Japan program itself, I would like to see an exchange for rural entrepreneurs that would allow them gain more experience with each other’s business models than what we had time to do on our trip. I would particularly like to see an exchange of female entrepreneurs from Japan and the U.S., who I think would have a lot in common.



To fund future exchanges, I would like to suggest a “pay it forward” model in which people who have participated in past exchanges are invited to raise money to send someone else on the next exchange. I would be willing to raise money to sponsor someone else on an exchange, especially if they were from Appalachia and working in food systems.