

22/12/2014

JSPS Fellow: Dr. Maria Carmen Hubbard, CRE/AFRD, Newcastle University

Host: Prof. Tokumi Odagiri, School of Agriculture, Department of Agri-Food & Environmental Policy, Meiji University

Research Report

FY2014 JSPS Invitation Fellowship for Research in Japan (Short-term)

Purpose and outline of my visit

In January 2014 I was awarded a short-term fellowship by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. My application was supported by a highly respected academic, Professor Tokumi Odagiri of Meiji University. Dr. Odagiri is professor of rural policy and governance at the Department of Agri-Food and Environmental Policy in the School of Agriculture and a champion of rural regeneration in Japan. He is an adviser to the Japanese Prime Minister in rural matters and sits on various governmental, academic and local committees. My research visit took place between 2nd November and 1st December, 2014, and its purpose was two-fold: to deliver several talks regarding new trends in EU policies for food, agriculture and rural development, and to partake in fieldwork and visits to various rural areas. Japan has always been for me a fascinating and intriguing country and as this was my first visit I was extremely excited. My programme was very intensive and rigorously planned by my host, but also very rewarding and enlightening. Beyond my main host institution, I had the opportunity to meet and have discussions with Japanese academics and researchers from other institutions, such as Tokyo Institute of Technology, Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, Tayoma University of International Studies, but also Chiba, Gunma, Oita, Kokushikan, Nagoya, Utsunomiya, Hirosaki and Tokyo Universities. More important was the array of social science disciplines covered, for example agricultural structure and policy, sociology, resource economics, agricultural economics, rural development, agri-business, industrial technology and innovation, geography and environmental studies. The meetings gave both parties the chance to learn from each other and exchange ideas and knowledge related to agricultural, food and rural issues in both Japan and the European Union, particularly the United Kingdom. Given the type of research my Japanese colleagues are carrying out, I had the opportunity to travel a lot outside the Tokyo area to experience the beauty of the Japanese countryside, traditions, culture and food.



On my second day in Japan, a bank holiday (Culture Day), after visiting the beautiful Odawara Castle, I was invited to attend a symposium on sustainable regional development. The symposium, which aimed to share the vision and local activities for promoting the use of renewable energy by the local people and for the local people in Odawara-city, gathered a mixed audience of over 50 people, including academics, civil servants of local authorities and members of the general public. And this was on a bank holiday!



In the following weeks, the focus of my research with my Japanese colleagues took us from Tokyo to the south of Japan to Ajimu (Oita Prefecture) on the Kyushu Island, to Sadamoto village of Kimitsu-city (Chiba Prefecture), to Mishima (Shizuoka Prefecture) and to Iketani and Wakatochi villages (Niigata Prefecture). The visits were carefully planned by Japanese academic colleagues from these areas who arranged meetings and interviews with a variety of stakeholders, from heads and representatives of local authorities, local communities, local schools, community development associations, rural advisers (rangers), NGOs, to farmers, small business owners (e.g. wine producer, green tourism, restaurants), students, women representatives of rural communities and volunteers.



Each place and case study had its own story, specificity and its own rural development projects. For example, Oita Prefecture is famous not only for its 'onsens', but also for its local traditional food and forestry products. A combination of mountains and coastal areas and fertile farmland offer a variety of seasonal products and a mixture of farming, forestry and fishing industries. Rice, vegetables, fruits (grapes), flowers, cedar trees, and bamboo are amongst the main crops. The area is also well-known for its 'Bungo beef' (a Japanese breed), kabosu citrus, but particularly for its dried and fresh shiitake mushrooms. In Mishima we enjoyed and discussed several local environmental regeneration projects run by the

Groundwork Mishima Partnership, including the reintroduction of a rare water plant 'the Mishima Baikamo', which disappeared decades ago following severe water pollution. Meanwhile, in Sadamoto village we discovered the 'regional (natural, cultural and historical) treasures' following a research project which started seven years ago to support rural development. Then in Niigata we met volunteers from the Nagaoka Earthquake Disaster Archive Centre, women who have opened and run a small traditional food restaurant, a leader of the Wakatochi Local Committee, a representative of farmers' market and a local 'ranger' (rural development officer) who shared with us their struggle, challenges and resilience for rural regeneration following the severe earthquake which hit the region in 2004. However, although Japan and the UK are very different in many respects, their rural areas share some similar problems, including an ageing population as young people depart for the cities, particularly Tokyo in the case of Japan, depopulation and economic decline. Moreover, a low fertility rate puts the entire of Japan at risk of a serious decline in population in the forthcoming decades. Some of these issues have also been discussed with a policy director from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, who kindly agreed to meet myself and prof. Odagiri.



I have also been privileged to be invited to attend a very large conference (over 1,200 participants) organised by the National Association of Towns and Villages at which the Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzō Abe, and other distinguished guests were present.



Between all these trips and visits, I have met and established new links with individual academics and also delivered two talks. These focused on challenges for rural areas in the UK and Romania. The first talk took place in Ajimu in Oita Prefecture to a larger audience whereas the second was addressed to undergraduate students at Meiji University. Last, but not least, I contributed to a symposium organised by my colleagues from Meiji University which brought together academics from a number of universities. My presentation focused on major policy issues regarding agriculture and rural development in the EU, particularly in England, post 2013.



Some final thoughts, comments and acknowledgements

Has my fellowship been a success? There is no doubt that, for me, the research trip to Japan was one of the best I have ever encountered and, for sure, without the financial support of the JSPS would not have been possible. Although it was demanding, I enjoyed every minute and learnt a lot about rural issues in Japan. Each trip and meeting enhanced my knowledge and raised questions about how, together, we can make rural areas more economically viable and attractive to live and work in. Clearly, if issues such as depopulation, ageing and economic decline of rural areas are to be addressed there is a need for fundamental changes in policies, with national and regional governments applying and supporting them at the local level, both in Japan and the UK. As one of the many local people whom I met put it “Tokyo [like London and any big city] is like a black hole. It sucks everything in”. Thus, for rural areas to thrive there has to be opportunities (not only for jobs) which will retain and attract young people beyond the large metropolises. Academic issues aside, what I enjoyed most about my visit was the friendship of my Japanese colleagues, the welcoming and warm hospitality of local people who “embraced me” in their community, the beauty of the countryside, the richness of the Japanese traditions and culture and, of course, the food. None of these would have been possible without the support and effort of my host Prof. Tokumi Odagiri and his team. To all of them and the JSPS I am grateful and indebted.



Carmen Hubbard, Newcastle University

carmen.hubbard@ncl.ac.uk