

Practice of collaborative action research to link Asia and Africa

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Development experts have suggested that we rethink the conventional economic growth model.¹ One of the reasons for this may be that economic growth does not necessarily assure the increase in people's subjective well-being.² Another is related to growing concern over the worldwide environmental destruction and natural disasters related to climate change.

Adverse effects of the conventional development model and natural catastrophes led to the world agreeing on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs consist of seventeen goals including economic well-being, education, health, gender, diversity, and a wide range of environmental aspects. SDG-11 sets targets on the realization of sustainable cities and communities. Thus, we need to find a practical approach and prompt action at the community level to accomplish this goal. In this study, we focus on sustainable community development. Mainly, we pay close attention to a unique tool called *Jimotogaku* created in *Minamata*, Japan, to revitalize rural communities. We explain the background, concept, and process of the *Jimotogaku* method and share a collaborative action research project applying the method in a community mapping program for youth in Bhutan. We discuss the potential use of both the *Jimotogaku* method and collaborative action research to make more rural communities viable and sustainable across Asia and Africa, meeting the overarching goals laid out by the SDGs.

Collaborative action research for community development

Social sciences deal with various issues such as poverty, community revitalization, access to education and health services, ethnic conflicts and discrimination, and so forth. However, solutions to tackle these problems are not always straightforward. Instead, they require an understanding of the characteristics of each society, since these issues are deeply rooted in the complexity of social and economic systems influenced by different factors. A theoretical work could help us grasp the causes and impacts of social issues, yet it won't provide us with solutions. Action research plays a significant role in finding remedies as it has been

developed to improve the quality of human-related services such as community activities, social welfare, healthcare, and education.³ In particular, we consider collaborative action research (if researchers and stakeholders work as a team) as a useful tool to design and implement practical research activities to solve a particular social problem.

Creation of the *Jimotogaku* Method to revitalize local community in Japan

Minamata Disease involves an organic mercury poisoning; it was first discovered in and named after Minamata city (Kumamoto prefecture, Japan) in 1956. It was caused by industrial wastewater dispatched by a chemical factory (Chisso) into the ocean. Minamata city's reputation was tainted by the disease, and further depopulation occurred due to a rapid increase in rural-urban migration incurred by modernization. Local people simply perceived the demise of their communities as 'fate'. A former city officer in Minamata was concerned for the future of the local communities, and in the 1990s he invented the *Jimotogaku* method to change local people's mindsets toward their communities from a negative to a positive.

He tested the method by bringing visitors from big cities to Kagumeishi, a rural community in Minamata, and asked local people to guide them. While walking through the neighborhood, the visitors enjoyed discovering things they had not seen or heard before and were impressed with the local way of life, shown to them by the local guides. Conversely, the local guides were surprised to learn that the visitors from urban areas were 'positively impressed' with local resources, traditions, and culture, which they simply took for granted. The local guides gradually recognized that they had not been 'left behind' and they enjoyed revitalizing their community. The adoption of the *Jimotogaku* method, motivated the residents to start thinking how to make use of their valuable resources to improve their well-being. For instance, a local women's group was formed, and this group started a food-catering business based on a philosophy of local products for local consumption. The Kagumeishi village received the highest award in 2005 from Japan's central

government for reviving its local community. Over the last two decades, the *Jimotogaku* method has been gradually spreading in rural communities across Japan.⁴

Experimental pilot in Bhutan

In Bhutan, youth unemployment is a serious issue, and rapid migration flows from rural to urban areas have been on the increase. This migration trend could hamper Bhutan's social and economic development path envisioned by Gross National Happiness (GNH). An integrated project of community mapping and the *Jimotogaku* method was designed and implemented by the NGO, the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD), and Kusago Laboratory at Kansai University. The *Jimotogaku* community mapping program's unique feature as a collaborative action research method is how it creates a friendly interaction between visitors and local stakeholders. This two-way interaction program aims at bringing mindset-changes of both visitors and stakeholders. For visitors, working on the community mapping with local guides changes their perceptions of rural communities because the mapping exercise allows them to explore rich local resources: people, nature, and the local way of life. On the other hand, for local stakeholders, the community mapping exercise helps them to rediscover the value of their community and potential uses, by interacting with the visitors.

The *Jimotogaku* community mapping program was conducted in Kuzhugchen, a small rural village in the district of Thimphu. 8 Bhutanese students, from primary school to college age, participated in the pilot program, and two local people joined as local guides. The two-day program began with a briefing at Kuzhugchen Middle Secondary School; the youth participants were shown the process of mapping, how to approach local people and were given interview sheets, resource cards, stationary, and cameras. After the briefing session, the participants were divided into two groups of four; one pre-identified local guide was assigned to walk with each group. On the first day, the participants took a community walk, exploring community resources like plants, cash crops, houses, people, and the natural environment. With the help of the local guides, the participants came to better understand the community and learned to identify valuable resources, of which villagers themselves took little notice. On the second day, using the photos taken and information gathered during the community walk, hand-made local resource maps were created and presented to local residents. We conducted pre- and post-program surveys with the youth participants and the results showed evident and encouraging results: many participants changed their views toward the rural community from negative to positive. Also, some showed an interest in activities for rural development.

A unique feature of the *Jimotogaku* community mapping program is to have a two-way feedback session between the student participants and local. In Kuzhugchen village, after the student presentation, the residents started a discussion about a local temple mentioned in the presentation. They came to the conclusion that they did not realize how precious and valuable their local resources are. The first program was limited in scale, but the method was clearly shown to be a useful tool to motivate people and communities to become active in viable and sustainable community development.

Potential of collaborative action research across Asia and Africa

In the context of sustainable community development, a conventional growth-centered development approach tends to look down at rural communities as old-fashioned, when compared to urban communities. With a growing negative perception of their own community, the *Jimotogaku* method can be a powerful mindset-change tool. It could even create a chance for local people to be creative in designing the community's future by interacting with visitors from outside.

The *Jimotogaku* method, an action research tool, has some potential to empower stakeholders by discovering their social, economic, cultural, political and environmental resources. The method can be regarded as a practical research tool, which not only expands local people's knowledge, but also encourages them to maintain and cultivate a locally grown sustainable way of life.

A week-long training program (part of a JICA Local Government Reform training program), including the *Jimotogaku* method module, was designed by the Kusago Laboratory and implemented in *Minamata* for government officers in charge of local development from Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Zambia. The positive responses from the participants to the module showed the potential of the *Jimotogaku* method to change mindsets and empower bottom-up sustainable community development in African countries.

We also need to look at the potential and challenge of collaborative action research. As for the potential, it could change the conventional way of research collaboration from experts-driven to stakeholders-centered. As a result, we could empower both collaborating researchers and practitioners /stakeholders. Researchers could widen and deepen their understanding of a social issue from multiple angles, which enhance the link between theory and practice. Stakeholders become equipped with alternative ways to examine the problems they face, recognize strength and weakness, identify local resources, and so on. In other words, collaborative action research could assist continuously evolving communities and institutions to make our society better. If we challenge and overcome such obstacles, collaborative action research could help us to lead people-driven sustainable community development through co-learning and co-creation across Asia and Africa.

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Notes

- 1 Kusago, T. 2007. 'Rethinking of Economic Growth and Life Satisfaction in Post-WWII Japan – A Fresh Approach', *Social Indicators Research* 81(1):79-102.
- 2 Easterlin, R. 1974. 'Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?', in David, P.A. & Reder, M.W. (eds) *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*. New York: Academic Press, pp.89-125.
- 3 Herr, K. & Anderson, G.L. 2005. *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty*. Sage Publications; <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226644>
- 4 Yoshimoto, T. 2008. *Jimotogaku wohajimeyo* [Let us start neighborhood study method]. Iwanami Junior Shinsho.

