

Schools in Rural Areas and Gross National Happiness: Endogenous Actions Of Small Communities In Japan And Sweden

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Abstract

The increasing dominance of the market principle with its stresses on efficiency has brought about educational problems. In Japan and Sweden, schools in small communities have been closed due to the decreasing number of students. The impact of a school closure in a small community is both functional and symbolical, whereby school closure eventually leads the community to its death. The aim of this paper is to present the efforts made by Community K and Villages D and L to keep their school in their community, and to discuss the cases in the framework of GNH.

Introduction

During the last few decades, neo-liberalism and the market principle have increasingly intruded into the field of education. The dominance of the market principle with its stresses on effectiveness, efficiency, and freedom of choice has created the situation where the state responsibilities and controls are decreased (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000b). Emphases on efficiency in school education have brought about several educational problems. In cases of Japan, for example, small-scale rural schools in under-populated areas have been closed down partly in pursuit of economic efficiency. In such cases, students in the closed schools are forced to commute to another school that may or may not be within an acceptable distance from parents' point of views.

However, the impact of a school closure in a small community that is losing its population is not only functional, but also symbolical (Pestoff, 2005; Woods, 2007). In a rural community, losing a school does not only mean that children and youths lose a place to study, but also that people living in the community lose the centre of the community. Also, it is highly unlikely that families with school-age children move into a community that has no school. Thus, closing a school implies, in a long run, a gradual death of the community, which creates a serious problem in sustainable social development.

When a community faces the depopulation and eventual school closure, the survival and the potential revitalization of the community depend on the quality of the civil society to a great extent. If the people in the community have a strong will to defend the school, they would take initiatives to revitalize the community by mobilizing available resources in the community. There are some sporadic cases that show such efforts made in several rural areas in Sweden and Japan. *Community K* in Japan and *Village D* and *Village L* in Sweden are small communities that have faced the crisis of the school closure. In those cases, the people in the communities defend the school in the community. The school in *Village D* in Sweden was eventually closed down in 2007 after many years of struggles. However, *Community K* in Japan and *Village L* in Sweden prioritize the sustainability of the community, and have been struggling to defend the wellbeing of the students, their parents, and the community.

The aim of this paper is to present the efforts that *Community K*, *Village D*, and *Village L* have been making in order to keep their school in their community, and to discuss the cases in the framework of the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

GNH and endogenous development

Those who criticize the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) often see it as a utopian ideal, and some others argue that happiness is a highly subjective concept, and that it is not possible for a country as a whole to pursue GNH. Although these arguments

are reasonable to some extent, they overlook the basic social foundations that the national state can provide for the wellbeing of its citizens. Some of the examples are the state responsibilities for medical service, free basic education, unemployment support, and so forth (Timonen, 2003). Needless to say, there is a possibility that happiness and/or ideal that the national state pursues and happiness that the individual pursues are not identical. Aoki (in Nandy et al., 2003) terms the former “Big Happiness” and the latter “Small Happiness”. In the welfare state, “Big Happiness” and “Small Happiness” are rather close to each other, or “Big Happiness” tends to adapt to “Small Happiness”. On the other hand, in the globalizing neo-liberalism that emphasizes minimum state interference, effectiveness and efficiency, the elements in the welfare services have gradually been undermined (Clarke, 2004; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000a). This change indicates an increasing gap between “Big Happiness” and “Small Happiness” in the welfare states. In other words, the welfare states are gradually becoming incapable to serve “Small Happiness”.

In Bhutan where the philosophy of GNH is originated, the basic welfare services, such as free basic education and medical service, are established as basic social foundations for GNH. These foundations are based on and supported by four holistic and strategic pillars established in pursuit of GNH. They are:

- Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development,
- Conservation of environment,
- Preservation and promotion of culture, and
- Promotion of good governance (Thinley, 2005, p.9).

What are expressed in these four pillars are sustainability, preservation, and conservation that are challenging the rapid changes and uncertainty that the processes of globalization brought about. Shortly speaking, the basic foundations for wellbeing of people are linked to certainty, stability, and sustainability, although this should not be understood that only static and unchangeable society can provide the citizens with foundations for wellbeing.

The term “sustainable development” is interpreted in various ways, but Hobo (1996) defines it as a reconstruction of the development mode that leads the human society to be sustainable. However, sustainability perceived in the frameworks of “Big Happiness” and “Small Happiness” may differ rather radically. For example, sustainability from the national state’s point of view may be linked to continuous economic development that is backed up by urbanization and technology development, while sustainability for the individual may be to remain in a small village. However, it can be safely said that down-to-earth sustainability of the society is tightly linked to endogenous development. Nishikawa (1989) states that historically speaking endogenous development emerged as an ideology that would remove centralized development and reject materialization of human being. Endogenous development is the self-rehabilitation embedded in the local community based on the localism, which differs from the local development initiated by the national state. According to Tsurumi (1989), localism is the ideology with which people living within certain geographical area together pursue the political, economic, and cultural autonomy rooted in the specific characteristics of the community.

When people in a community face the school closure, the power of the civil society linked with the ideology of endogenous development is a crucial element in the counter action. Here, it is necessary to understand the concept of civil society from various perspectives. It is commonly understood that the civil society consists of various non-state organizations and institutions that are located between the private sphere and the state. Those organizations and institutions may be based on communal collectivities or associative collectivities. The social ties in the communal collectivities are primary ties that are based on, for example, the family, kin, and religion. These primary ties often provide the individuals with stability and direction (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Fromm, 1978; Tönnies, 1955; Wesolowski, 1995). With regard to the associative collectivities, individuals freely join the social ties in their pursuit of own interests and goals, and withdraw from the ties when they so wish. The associative

collectivities are based on cooperative behaviours deriving from individual interests (Fine, 1997; Lively & Reeve, 1997; Wesolowski, 1995).

While the communal collectivities are what the individuals are born with, the associative collectivities are what the individuals choose. Thus, Giddens (1993) characterizes the individual in the communal collectivity as a “subject”, and in the associative collectivity as an “agent”. However, to understand the “subject” as a passive individual, and the “agent” as an active individual, and to link only the latter with the concept of civil society are misleading. In the civil society, high value is placed on political, economic, and cultural participation and accountability (Chandhoke, 1995; Hirst, 1997; Seligman, 1992), which can be observed within both the communal collectivities and associative collectivities. In Japan, many rural communities consist of communal collectivities based on geographically-bound kinship ties that are akin to the primary ties.

Regardless of the different types of social ties, the crucial element of the social sustainability and its associated human wellbeing is endogenous power. Ohashi (2007) introduces a useful concept of “humanware” that supplements the insufficient coupling of hardware and software. She uses the concept of “humanware” in her discussion about the construction of the society that protects natural environment. In this context, hardware is understood as national policies and frameworks that combat the environmental problems, and software as laws and social systems that are necessary to implement the national policy. Ohashi defines the concept of “humanware” as people’s lifestyles and actions through which people realize their passion towards environmental protection. She argues that having established hardware and software is not sufficient to realize the society with environmental protection, and “humanware” is the necessary element.

Community K: A case in Japan

In Japan, the birth rate was about 2,092,000 in 1973, but was about 1,093,000 in 2006. At the same time, the population aged 65 and

above accounted for 20.8 percent of the total population in 2006 (IPSS, 2008), which indicates that Japan has become an aging society. The decreasing birth rate and the feature of the aging society, combined with the long experience of the drift of population away from the countryside, have brought about great challenges in rural Japan. The emergence and the increasing numbers of underpopulated areas have become a serious problem for sustainable social development. The devastation of the rural areas in Japan started in the latter half of the 1950s when the policy emphasis on the heavy industry brought about two impacts on those areas. One impact was the energy revolution where the main energy source was shifted from firewood and charcoal to petroleum, which affected the rural areas with the loss of employment opportunities and income in the production of fire-wood and charcoal. The other impact was that the rapid heavy industry development absorbed labour force from the rural areas (Hobo, 1996).

More recently, in the so-called “great mergers in the Heisei era” during the last few years, many small villages and towns are either merged to form larger administrative units, or absorbed into larger municipalities. Some of the justifications for this reform are to enlarge the size of an administrative unit, to strengthen the financial capacity of the administrative unit, and to increase the administrative efficiency. With those mergers, schools in such villages and towns are often merged as well, which resulted in the closure of many small-scale schools with a small number of students. According to estimation, more than 1,100 public compulsory schools will be closed down during the next few years, many of which are located in rural areas (Yomiuri Shinbun, 2008).

Community K is one of the communities that belong to *Town T* that was an autonomous town in Niigata Prefecture until 2005, when it was merged with a neighbouring city. Even though *Town T* is administratively a part of a larger city today, it is still recognized as a local autonomous district. *Community K* is located in a low mountainous area that is based on the rice production on small-scale rice fields. This community as a whole is the unit of the

neighbourhood self-governing body (“jichikai” in Japanese), and has a chairperson and vice-chairperson of the self-governing body. The population changes in *Town T* as a whole are shown in Table 1 below, which indicates a gradual population decrease. *Community K* itself has 125 households with approximately 320 residents, but the members of only 116 households are actual residents in the community. The rest are living outside the community or stay in old people’s homes and other places. Those who are more than 65 of age in *Community K* account for about 48 percent of the population.¹ Despite the rather small population, it has been quite common that people marry within the community, and the social tie in this community is close to the primary tie.

Table 1: Population changes in Town T²

Year	1995	2003	2004	2005
Population	2,802	2,326	2,285	2,195

Currently, *Community K* has one primary school, consisting of grades from one to six, which has a long history dating back its establishment to 1871. Until 1972, there was a lower secondary school in *Community K*, but was merged with another lower secondary school in the neighbouring *Community O*. As a result, lower secondary school students in *Community K* commute to *Community O* that is about six kilometres away. In 1990, one primary school in the neighbouring and further remote *Community I* was merged with the school in *Community K*, and the school bus was arranged between *Community I* and *Community K*. The primary school in *Community K* today covers the area of three communities: *Community K*, *Community I*, and *Community T* (Sakaino & Hosogane, 2008).

Currently, there are 14 students enrolled in this school, but there are not all successive grades from one to six. There is no student in grade four, and only one student with special needs in grade two. Grades five and six are integrated one class. Among the 14 students, three are from the neighbouring *Community I* that is about 6 kilometres further remote from *Community K*. In 2009, five students

in grade six would leave the school for the lower secondary education, and four students are expected to enter grade one. Thus, there will be only 13 students in 2009 unless a family with school-age child(ren) moves into the community.

This primary school has been supported and fostered by the residents in the three communities (*Communities K, I, and T*) that consist of the geographical area that the school covers. Education at this school is held in tight collaboration with the community people where people go into the school on various occasions, and school students learn in the community. Community people are regarded as “masters” who have rich knowledge, skill, and wisdom. One example is that students grow rice ecologically in the school rice field with the help from the community people. They follow the whole process of the rice production, such as planting the rice, removing unwanted grasses, and harvesting and refining the rice. Finally, students in the fifth and sixth grades go to Tokyo in order to distribute the rice that they grew³, and in the community they invite community people for a dinner with the rice at the school (Sakaino & Hosogane, 2008).

Before *Town T* was merged with the neighbouring city in 2005, discussions on the merger of the primary school in *Community K* and *Community O* started in around 2000 at the town administration level. Since there was the suggestion for the merger of *Town T* with the neighbouring large city, in fear of the loss of town autonomy after the merger with the city, the town mayor wanted to make a decision on the school merger while *Town T* still had its autonomy. The conclusion drawn at the town administration level, without any discussions with the students, parents and the community people, was that there was no way to avoid the school merger. According to Mr. S, a resident of *Community K*, the *Town T* administration planned to build an old people's home at the school locality after it is closed down. Mr. S, who was then the chairperson of the PTA at the school in *Community K*, protested the rather unilateral decision of the town administration, and many parents followed.⁴

There were two mothers of school children who thought that the school merger was unavoidable, but there were strong voices from fathers that were against the school merger. At the end, the feeling to defend the school became stronger (Sakaino & Hosogane, 2008). Parents eventually insisted that they would build a school on the ground of the Shinto shrine in the community and hire teachers, if the school should be closed down.⁵ Thus, the primary school in *Community K* was defended by the parents and the community people. This does not mean that the continuous presence of the school in *Community K* is perfectly guaranteed. In practice, the kitchen of this school where the school lunch has been prepared by a community member will be closed down in 2009. The lunch then will be prepared in *Community O* and delivered to the school in *Community K*.⁶

For the moment, there is no discussion about the school closure in the near future. The chairperson of the *Community K* self-governing body also stated that this community would defend the school as long as there are students commuting from the further remote *Community I*. These communities belong to the heavy snowfall area, but the snowfall in *Community I* is much heavier than in *Community K* even though the distance is only about six kilometres. For the school students, longer traffic communications from *Community I* would be very difficult during the wintertime, if the school in *Community K* disappears. To defend the school in *Community K* is not only for the students in the community, but also for the students in *Community I*.⁷ Mr. M, the vice-chairperson of the *Community K* self-governing body, stated that the school closure may become true in the future. However, the feeling towards the school closure is not acquiescence, but rather preparedness.⁸ The school has been the centre of the community, and both the chairperson and the vice-chairperson of the self-governing body state that negative impacts of school closure on the community would be quite major if it should happen. On the other hand, Mr. S states that the school closure would not mean an immediate disappearance of the community, and that it would take several decades before the community disappears. He also states that the most important point is not

whether the school remains, but whether the authorities respect the desires and expectations of the community people.

The people in *Community K* see the school as the centre of the community, and the action to defend the school is based on localism. The action may also be seen as a rejection of materialization of human being. When emphasis is put on economic efficiency, arranging a school bus is calculated as cheaper than maintaining the small-scale school. Then the school students are transported certain distances by bus with very little consideration, if there is any, for the climate conditions under different seasons, which can be seen as materialization of human being. The attitude of the people in *Community K*, that would defend the school not only for themselves, but also for the students commuting from the neighbouring *Community I*, is a rejection of materialization of human being.

Village D: A case in Sweden

Village D is a small village that belongs to *Municipality A* in Dalarna County in Sweden. Historically, this village was based on small-scale forestry, but affected by the decline in the forestry and depopulation (Halversson, 1999). The closest population centre ("tätort" in Swedish) *Village I* is located about 25 kilometres away from *Village D*. Table 2 below presents the population changes in *Village I* and *Village D*. As the table shows, compared to the population changes in *Village I*, the population has been rather rapidly and constantly decreasing in *Village D*. *Village D* consists of both the communal collectivity and the associative collectivity in that there are people who moved into the village as adult.

Table 2: Population Changes in Village I and Village D⁹

	1990	1995	2000	2005
<i>Village I</i>	692	815	765	769
<i>Village D</i>	-	92	71	62

Village D had a small public primary school consisting of grades from one to six. The threat of the school closure in *Village D* started

in the 1970s (Halversson, 1999), but when the municipality proposed to close down the school, parents in the village opposed it (Pestoff, 2005). The municipality nevertheless closed down the school on August 10, 1983, without officially informing the parents in advance. On August 11, 1983, one parent living in the *Village D* visited *Village I*, and saw a newspaper headline that said that the school in *Village D* was closed down. It was only 11 days before the school start for the new school year. On the same day, parents were called to *Village I* by the local education authority, and were informed that the primary school in *Village D* was closed down the day before, and that the school students should be sent to the public primary school in *Village I* by school bus (Halversson, 1999).

Since it was expected that the number of the school students would increase in the following years, it was an unreasonable school closure from the villagers' point of view. The parents in *Village D* started a boycott instead of sending their children to the school in *Village I*. Students were educated by the parents at home, but Mr. H was supervising the students' learning. There are several volunteer teachers who came to the village to help the students, and the village received various supports from outside the village, such as financial support, books from the authors, teaching materials, and so forth.¹⁰

This boycott lasted from 1983 to 1989. Meantime students who finished the grade six in the village primary school went on to the lower secondary school in *Village I*. According to Ms. M who later became the school principal in *Village D*, there was no major problem with students' academic competence when they entered the lower secondary school. Although they did not have enough learning in physical education and craft works, such issues were solved easily.¹¹

After six years of boycott and negotiations, in 1989 the government finally accepted that the school should remain in *Village D* as an independent school ("fristående skola" in Swedish) that is funded publicly but is not run by a public body. The school in *Village D* became the first independent school in Sweden. The school

foundation (“stiftelse” in Swedish) was established in *Village D* to run the school. Since then, the number of the independent school has gradually increased in Sweden, and there have been small-scale rural schools that were transformed from the public school to the independent school. Table 3 below presents the number of students in different types of schools in Sweden. The independent school in *Village D* was finally closed down in 2007 due to an unacceptably small number of students in the village and no expected increase in the number.

Here, it is useful to revisit the concepts of hardware, software, and humanware in the contexts of school closures in underpopulated areas. Both in Japan and Sweden as welfare states, hardware (national state’s educational policies) and software (educational laws) to ensure citizen’s equal access to the compulsory education have been well established and followed. However, in the case of small-scale schools in underpopulated areas, the presence of hardware and software only is no longer enough to defend such schools that are regarded economically inefficient. Humanware is crucial in defending such small-scale schools. The case of *Village D* shows that humanware could even affect hardware and software, and the actions of people in the village led to the creation of new hardware and software that allow the establishment of independent schools. These new hardware and software enabled small-scale schools in underpopulated areas to be maintained by non-public bodies, when the public bodies withdraw their responsibilities to run the schools.

*Table 3: Numbers of Different Types of Schools and Students*¹²

		Number of Schools	Number of Students
2002/2003	Public school	4,565	997,037
	Independent school	538	60,045
2003/2004	Public school	4,470	979,244
	Independent school	565	67,054
2004/2005	Public school	4,381	952,125
	Independent school	576	71,451
2005/2006	Public school	4,306	919,174

2006/2007	Independent school	596	76,145
	Public school	4,256	881,505
2007/2008	Independent school	610	80,712
	Public school	4,185	849,514
	Independent school	635	86,205

Village L: Another case in Sweden

Village L is located in *Municipality S* in the south-western part of Värmland County in Sweden. Traditionally, this area was based on agriculture and stock farming, but large percent of the population today is employed in towns and cities within commutation. This village currently has one public primary school that covers from the pre-school (six-year-old children) to grade six. In 2007, the number of students was 45. The pre-school is one class, but grades 1-3 form one class, and grades 4-6 form another. The population in Parish L is shown in Table 4, although the area that the school covers is not completely identical with the parish.

Table 4: Population in Parish L¹³

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Male	369	365	364	358	356	358	351	355
Female	331	321	320	312	314	314	311	312
Total	700	686	684	670	670	672	662	667

The collectivity in *Village L* may be seen as a mixture of the communal tie and the associative tie, because there are people who moved into the village as adult. It may be characterized as the “communitarian” collectivity (Etzioni, 1993) in which the collectivity is based on shared morality, responsibility and spirit, which is akin to the communal collectivity. This village has an active village development group that aims to act step by step in a proactive manner, not to react after something worrying has happened. This group built an old people’s home in the village which is run by an economic association initiated by the group. One school teacher

stated¹⁴ that the village development group has a plan to increase collaborations between the old people's home and the school. One of the goals of the group is to keep both old people and young people within the village.

According to Dr. R¹⁵ who is the leader of the village development group, there has been a repeated threat of the school closure in *Village L*. There is a belief in the group that a village without school cannot attract families with children, or cannot keep the youths who want to establish themselves in the village and form a family there. Dr. R states that if the school closure becomes the reality, the village development group is prepared to take over the currently public school in *Village L*, and transform it to an independent school.

In this village, the village development actions are future-oriented, and the maintaining the school within the village is seen in the more holistic picture of the village development. The development activities in this village are endogenous and differ from state-initiated development programs. The endogenous development in this village is based on strong localism in that people in this village, regardless of their birthplace, pursue the social self-efficiency in the village.

Summary

The three cases presented above show endogenous actions in civil society that defend the small-scale school in *Community K*, *Village D*, and *Village L*, although the social ties in those communities differ. The collectivity found in *Community K* is akin to the communal tie based on people's historical geographic bond with the community. *Village D* and *Village L* have a kind of combination of the communal tie and the associative tie in that there are members who were not born in those villages but moved in as adult. The efforts made in those communities to defend their school are endogenous, because they are embedded in the local community, and are based on localism.

The fact that the people in the three case communities need to defend their school depicts the gap between “Big Happiness” and “Small Happiness”. On the one hand, the national state or local authorities pursue economic efficiency by closing down small-scale schools. On the other hand, members in those small communities want to defend and keep the small school in their community. One important factor in all three cases is that those schools are at the level of the compulsory education for which citizen’s right is protected by law. As welfare states, both Japan and Sweden established hardware and software that guarantee an equal access to the compulsory education regardless of the place where students live. However, as the nature of the welfare state changes, such a guaranteed access has become less self-evident in the cases of small-scale schools in underpopulated areas.

The case of *Village D* clearly shows that hardware and software alone are not enough for the small-scale schools in underpopulated areas to continue to exist. Humanware is crucial in defending small-scale schools. The case of *Village D* shows that humanware could even affect hardware and software, and the actions of people in this village led to the new hardware and software that allow the establishment of independent schools. Although the school in *Village D* was finally closed down in 2007, in *Community K* and *Village L*, endogenous community development continues, and the school in those communities are situated in the endogenous development.

Considering the philosophy of GNH, the national state may or may not be able to provide basic welfare services for happiness and wellbeing of its citizens. Regardless of the responsiveness and competence of the national state, it may be stated that endogenous development initiated by healthy civil society is an important key and necessary element in the pursuit of GNH.

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¹ Interview with Mr. M, the chairperson of the *Community K* self-governing body, held on July 15 2008 at the public hall in *Community K*

² Source: 1995: www.stat.go.jp/data/kokusei/1995/08-16.htm; Others: www.maff.go.jp/hokuriku/rural/kouryu/jirei02.html

³ Interview with Mr. M held on July 15 2008

⁴ Interview with Mr. S, held on July 29 2008 at the primary school in *Community K*

⁵ Interview with Mr. M held on July 15 2008

⁶ Interview with Mr. S, held on July 29 2008

⁷ Interview with Mr. M held on July 15 2008

⁸ Interview held on July 15 2008 at the public hall in *Community K*

⁹ Statistics Sweden: www.ssd.scb.se/databaser/makro/SaveShow.asp

¹⁰ Interview with Ms. M., former school principle of the independent school in *Village D*, held on June 14, 2008, in the school building in *Village D*

¹¹ Interview, June 14, 2008

¹² Adapted from National Agency of Education: www.skolverket.se/sb/d/1638#paragraphAnchor0

¹³ Statistics Sweden: www.ssd.scb.se/databaser/makro/start.asp

¹⁴ Interview held on May 7, 2008

¹⁵ Personal communications October 27, 2007; September 24, 2008