



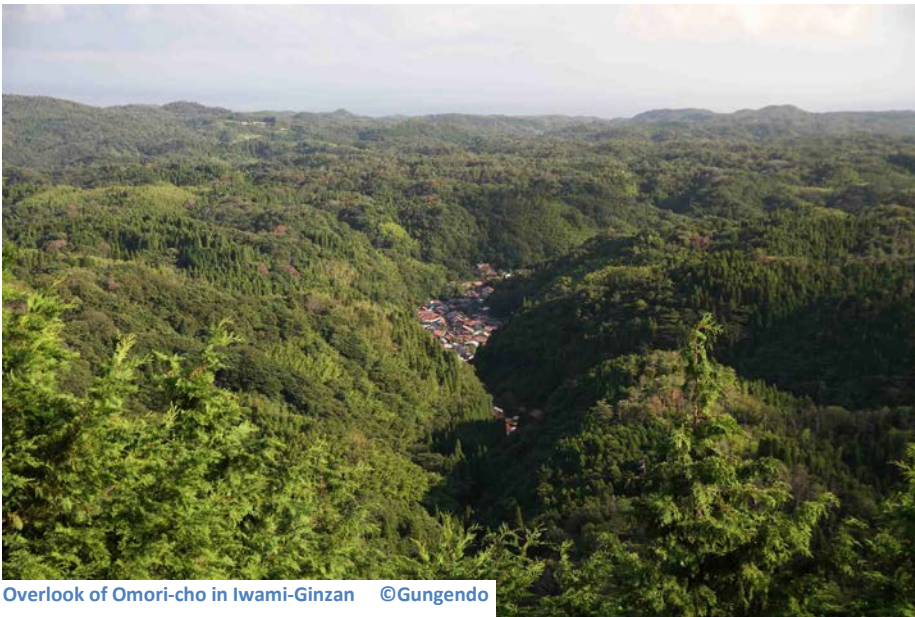
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Success Stories

Japan: It takes a (small) village

By Catherine Nolan, Julie Saito, Mary de Sousa



Overlook of Omori-cho in Iwami-Ginzan ©Gungendo

One of the world’s most modern, affluent nations, Japan owes its past growth to its mastery of 20th century processes: industrialization, urbanization and globalization. But today, facing 21st century challenges, the country is exploring alternative paths to prosperity based on different values – and along the way it is rediscovering its roots and the values of its past.

Shaken by recent calamities – the financial crash of 2008 and the devastating 2011 earthquake – the Japanese, and particularly the younger generations, are asking questions about the meaning of material success, the quality of their lives and the shape of the future. The answers they are finding are based on community action and sustainability.

These ideas are timely. It is no coincidence they are also essential components of UNESCO’s roadmap for implementing its Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes the role of civil society as a critical driver for sustainable development.

The rural village of Omori-cho, with only 400 habitants, finds itself on the cutting edge of this new sustainability movement. Situated in the southwest of Japan’s Honshu Island near the Sea of Japan in Shimane Prefecture, it is part of the silver mining area of Iwami-Ginzan, inscribed as a UNESCO

Cultural Heritage site in 2007 for its preservation of ancient wooden buildings using traditional skills and materials. Omori-cho had been dying a slow death since the silver mines closed in 1923. Now an influx of young people, most of whom moved there after the earthquake, are bringing revival.



Street in Omori-cho ©Gungendo

“We knew arrivals had our lives reset by the disaster. We were faced with the question of what we really needed to be happy,” explains Louis Miura, 29, who arrived in Omori-cho from Tokyo in 2011 to work for an innovative local company. “I found what I was looking for in Omori-cho – a lifestyle that isn’t defined by money.”

It was an unexpected discovery. A graduate of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies who had lived abroad, Louis was considering a career in the Foreign Ministry. But then he met his mentor: Daikichi Matsuba, founder and chairman of the Iwami-Ginzan Lifestyle Research Centre, a company based in Omori-cho that uses traditional resources to restore housing and to produce clothing, food and other merchandise.

When Louis heard Daikichi speak at his university, he says, “I was convinced by his passionate commitment to revitalizing his community.” And the young man just happened to have the right skills to contribute, acquired when he was a pupil at the Steiner School in South Africa: “I learned organic farming and livestock management as part of the curriculum. I really appreciated my contact with nature during this period. Now, I enjoy octopus fishing in the ocean on my days off.” He also enjoys socializing with the new friends he has made. “Living in a small apartment in Tokyo, I hardly knew my next-door neighbors. In Omori-Cho, even strangers say hello.” During the work week, he’s busy doing public relations for Daikichi’s company.



Louis’s boss Daikichi is a native of Omori-cho, where his parents ran a drapery shop, but he left the village to go to university in Nagoya. He and his wife Tomi, who was doing patchwork at home to help make ends meet, became sustainability pioneers when they decided 35 years ago to leave their “stagnant” big-city life and return with their young daughter to Daikichi’s home town.



“The village was at the lowest point of its history,” recalls Tomi. “Most of the houses were abandoned.” Job opportunities were non-existent, and even Daikichi’s family did not encourage them to stay. “But we had a hunch country living would someday be valued, and we dreamed we could make use of things that were to be thrown away, and come up with original products that transmit the warmth of hands. So we started making small items in patchwork with left-over fabrics.” These were a big hit at a Tokyo gift show. “Our products conveyed the spiritual values that were handed down from our ancestors. They captured the hearts of city people.” Turning down offers from big companies, and despite their lack of experience, the Matsubas borrowed money and founded their business right there in Omori-cho. Today their products are sold under the brand name Gungendo in more than 25 shops around Japan as well as on line. The number of employees has grown from two – Daikichi and Tomi – to 150, 50 of whom work in Omori-cho. Even with prices reflecting the higher cost of locally-sourced materials, the Gungendo line of fabrics, clothing and other items has remained competitive. “I find the attitude among Japanese young people has changed since 2011,” says Tomi. “After witnessing people losing everything, they re-evaluated their definition of ‘What do I need to live?’ and became more sensitive to the true measure of happiness.



Tomi Matsuba @Gungendo

They shifted from trying to buy everything at a lower price to buying things nourished by tradition that would bring cultural richness into their lives. Our concept met their needs.”

Applying the concept to other projects was the next challenge. The Matsubas have so far renovated seven old houses in Omori-cho. Their own home is a samurai residence built in 1789, which was so derelict it took them seven years to restore it in the style of the Edo period. “Most of the material we used for renovation was debris from an old school and other demolished houses, and even stuff we found on the street,” Tomi recalls.

Communicating their concept to the rest of the village was also crucial, says Tomi: “For local women to rediscover the beauty of nature and the art of living in the countryside, I invited guests for lectures and symposiums. In the beginning, local women were looking from a distance and thinking ‘that is not for us’, then more and more women participated. It reflects a change in women’s consciousness.”

The Iwami-Ginzan area’s inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage site came as a welcome boost, particularly to tourism. “The landscape has remained unique precisely because the mine missed out on modernization,” underlines Tomi. “It symbolizes that happiness and economic growth are not necessarily correlated. That is exactly the message Omori-cho can send out.”

Some growth, of course, is necessary and desirable. Louis Miura points out the village could use more infrastructure: “Tourists usually come on day trips to take a quick bike tour. Accommodations are few and expensive. In the long term, Omori-cho should develop a sustainable way to offer more affordable

guest houses so that tourists can interact with people living here.”

In the same vein, Tomi recognizes that to move forward, the village needs to attract modern companies and become more diverse. “A town in black and white is not attractive – being multi-coloured is ideal. This is a village that used to be directly linked with the nation’s centre, so historically it can absorb various things and culturally it is at a high level.”

Another sign of positive development, Omori-cho is experiencing a baby boom– five babies last year and



Matsuba couple shares a dinner table with clients @Gungendo

seven this year. There were, in fact, several occasions in the past when no child was enrolled at the Omori Elementary School so that the villagers raised a fund to maintain the school building, in a common belief that a village will not sustain when a school is closed. Today, both Tomi a recent grandmother, and Louis are concerned with transmitting sustainability values to future generations. “My attention is currently focused on early childhood education starting at birth,” says Tomi, while Louis notes that everybody in the village knows the seven children enrolled at the day care center and the 19 at the elementary school. “The children are raised by the whole community. I’m



Graduation Ceremony of day care center @Gungendo

sure they'll develop strong communication skills for the future. I hope they grow up to have a broad perspective, all the more because they grew up in Omori-cho."

Sumiko Hama is another newcomer who is broadening the horizons of local residents. A violinist with the Orchestre National de France (French national orchestra) she "fell in love at first sight" with Omori-cho, when she and her husband, French flautist Thomas Prévost, came a few years ago to play in a concert. The two musicians now live in the village when they are not working in France. Last summer, with horn player Hervé Joulain, they organized an intensive music seminar for eight students. For the concert they gave on the last day, villagers crammed into what may be the smallest opera house in the world, "Omori-za".

The concert hall was once a bank building, transformed thanks to the generosity of another local entrepreneur, Toshiro Nakamura, president of Nakamura Brace, a company manufacturing prosthetics and orthotics.



Omori-za ©Nakamura Brace

Nakamura has also helped bring another new comer to the village, Kosaku Hidaka, who was previously working in a bakery in Tokyo after returning from Germany as a Meister in his craft. Just this October, he opened an authentic German bakery, Bäckerei Konditorei Hidaka, with his wife Naoko, also a Meister of German confectionery.



The newly opened Hidaka's bakery ©Nakamura Brace

Having a two-year-old environment for children to grow up." "Our dream is to create new bread and sweets with ingredients found in the region," says Kosaku.boy and new-born girl influenced their decision to move to Omori-cho, "an ideal Among other fervent advocates contributing to the Iwami-Ginzan revival, Kyosuke Inoue, executive producer of the NHK broadcasting organization, discovered the ancient silver mining area when he was transferred to Hiroshima, two hours away. He described its transformation in his TV series on "Satoyama-way Capitalism", depicting a movement that became popular in Japan after the global financial crisis, which promotes the idea of finding wealth in heritage and basing the economy on new values. Inoue expressed his enthusiasm in an article he contributed to UNESCO:

"Satoyama-way Capitalism in Iwami-Ginzan does not only represent ancient streets, but also symbolizes a flexible community. The inhabitants consume an unlimited amount of wild vegetables in the mountains all year long....They dye cloth by decocting branches of fruit trees to make clothing from natural beauty....it costs almost nothing. When people finally retire from working in a rice paddy, young people come together to 'plant rice on their behalf.' During the hot summers, they weed paddies and look forward to pounding mochi, a rice cake, with the harvested rice in the fall....Why did we think we needed to go to the city to become rich?"

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