

How to help revitalize the nation's rural areas

I was born in Yunlin County, where the number of deaths has exceeded births for 16 consecutive years. The population has been declining since 2008. This reflects a trend where young people, after finishing school, do not stay in Yunlin. Instead, they head to cities like Taipei or Taichung for job opportunities and a more vibrant lifestyle.

A friend of mine faced the dilemma of not finding suitable employment opportunities in her hometown after graduating from university. She hoped to find a job related to her profession in Yunlin County, but job opportunities there were limited. She had to leave her hometown and seek better career prospects in Taipei. Such stories are not uncommon in Yunlin County, as many young people confront similar dilemmas.

Taiwan faces an increasingly severe demographic challenge. The population is concentrated in urban areas, while rural areas are grappling with labor shortages and an aging population.

To tackle the issue, the National Development Council announced the Regional Revitalization Policy in 2019, aiming to encourage proactive thinking at the local level to boost regional industrial development. The goal is to attract younger people back to rural areas, promote internal migration within Taiwan and alleviate the excessive population concentration in cities.

The regional revitalization policy has been in place for six years, and the government has invested a significant amount of money, yet there have been no major results. Most young people still choose to work in cities. Successful projects are highlighted by the government, but more often they have fallen short, and the underlying issues remain unresolved. Why are young people unwilling to return to their hometowns? Is it due to flawed policies, or are there other factors at play?

Policies designed to address immediate social issues tend to be reactive. The current approach is more proactive, focusing on setting goals and a vision for what needs to be accomplished in the coming years. However, these policies still prioritize short-term interests and lack continuity. When a project ends, there is often no one to continue the work. Most rural residents focus on just getting by. The poor do not have the luxury of focusing on regional development.

Autonomous community organizations and enterprises are typically less powerful and have less resources. The government sector tends to have plenty of resources, but often lacks long-term planning and continuity, focusing solely on immediate and achievable goals. Cross-sectoral collaboration remains mostly theoretical and idealistic and is rarely put into practice.

Long-term and sustainable development of a region requires community engagement to be successful, and complemented by support and assistance from the public sector.

However, issues in Yunlin County have led me to question whether Taiwanese genuinely care about the nation's welfare. Would young people continue to move away from their hometowns in pursuit of higher salaries and better living conditions? Are the hyped slogans just blueprints that would never be achieved?

What is happening in the private sector is instructive. Corporations prioritize economic development over environmental concerns, resulting in pollution and damage to the environment.

Do Taiwanese sincerely love their homeland, or are they primarily concerned with accumulating wealth over the deeper welfare of the nation? Successful policy implementation might not be sufficient to arrest the decline unless Taiwanese begin to truly value their home.

Before we make the place, we need to love the place.

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