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SUSTAINABLE RURAL FUTURE

**“COMMITTING COOPERATIVES” AND THEIR IMPACTS ON THE
SUSTAINABLE RURAL FUTURE: EMPIRICAL ANALYSES ON
AGRICULTURAL, CONSUMERS, AND WORKERS COOPERATIVES IN
JAPAN**

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While rural cooperatives are expected to establish alternative socioeconomic systems to the hegemonic market economy systems and contribute to a rural sustainable future, they are often criticized for being caught by the very systems with which they try to compete. Japan, which boasts one of the most developed cooperative sectors in the globe, serves as a pertinent example. Especially after World War II, while the country has been implementing public policies to promote its cooperative sector, the sector eventually became a group subordinated to conservative ruling parties or embraced the rapidly growing market economy. However, more recent generations of Japanese cooperatives, so-called “committing cooperatives,” are overcoming these sectorial shortcomings. The research question was: what are the conditions fostering the transformative roles of these cooperatives for a sustainable rural future?

Employing an interdisciplinary approach combining rural sociology and political economy, this study delivers empirical evidence through analyses of public policies, statistics, literature, and interviews with representatives of agricultural, consumers, and workers cooperatives that engage diverse areas of rural sustainability in Japan. Data collection was conducted from 2023–2025. Results showed that, first, the leadership of cooperative chairs or that of coalitions with local governments contribute to altering the long-established conservative and conventionalized features of agricultural cooperatives, and shifting their activities toward organic farming to collaborate with public food procurement initiatives. Second, the new strategic approaches of consumers cooperatives are to connect food supply for their members with local organic and social farming that employ people from disadvantaged social groups (e.g., persons with disabilities). Third, the new 2022 legislation for workers cooperatives allows them to organize themselves to rescue abandoned farmlands/forests owing to depopulation and aging residents in rural communities, promoting small-scale agroecological farming. This evidence demonstrates that ample spaces exist for the cooperative sector to transform itself and society at large.

Palavras-chave: agricultural cooperative; consumers cooperative; workers cooperative; sustainability; japan.