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A Study of Approaches to Reorganizing Village Communities and Building a Care System to Respond to the Local/Rural Extinction Crisis

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1. Identifying the issue

At the World Economic Forum's (WEF) annual meeting held in Davos in January 2023, under the theme "Global Cooperation in a Divided World," the term "polycrisis" emerged as a keyword as concerns arose about the multiple crises the world faces. This word was used to describe the current situation of simultaneous and overlapping crises around the world, including the health crisis caused by COVID-19, climate change, the war between Ukraine and Russia, inflationary shocks, and dysfunctional democratic systems. Attendants at the forum went so far as to warn that if we do not face the "polycrisis" together, all of humanity could be annihilated.¹

The concept of "polycrisis" seems to apply not only at the global level but also to South Korea. In addition to the infectious disease crisis, which is still potentially dangerous worldwide, and the climate crisis, which is more serious and threatens the lives of humans and all other living creatures, in South Korea a demographic cliff is anticipated due to the country having the lowest birth rate among OECD countries, and a local/rural extinction crisis is becoming a reality; indeed, it appears that multiple crises are approaching at every moment.

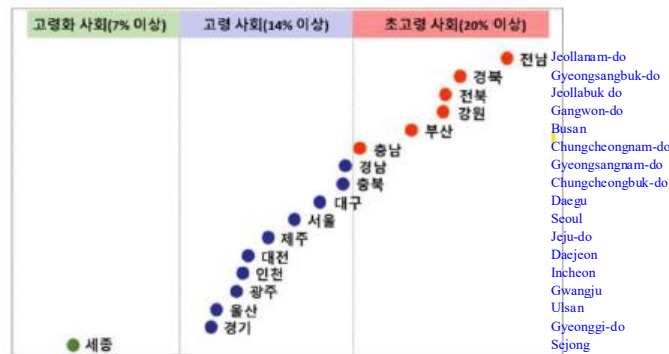
As one of the "polycrisis" phenomena faced by Korean society, a local or rural extinction crisis has become an important concern and topic. Relatedly, since 2003, Statistics Korea has published "Senior Citizen Statistics" each year on October 2, to coincide with "Senior Citizens' Day." This statistical report collects and organizes statistical data on the aging population and its economic activity, income distribution, and changes in consciousness. According to the "Senior Citizen Statistics 2023" released on September 26 last year, the group of people aged 65 or older accounts for 18.4% of South Korea's total population, and this proportion will continue to increase in the future, reaching 20.6% by 2025, when the country is expected to become a super-aged society.

It is noteworthy that as the aging of the population increases, "caring for the elderly" will inevitably be emphasized as a national task or social responsibility to be urgently addressed. Especially in South Korea's agricultural, forestry and fishing villages (hereinafter referred to as rural areas), the expected transition to the super-aged society is already underway. As one of the ways to address this problem, the reorganization of rural

¹ The term "polycrisis" was first introduced by the French philosopher Edgar Morin in the 1990s, and "complex crisis" has also been used to describe the same phenomenon. Later, in 2016, former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker described the various crises facing the EU at the time, including the Syrian refugee crisis and Brexit, as a "polycrisis," and American economic historian Adam Tooze, a professor at Columbia University, also mentioned the term in a media column in 2022, making it widely known. Refer to <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230118070800009>.

communities and the establishment of an “elder care system” have become urgent issues.

Aging society (7% or more of the population) / Aged society (14% or more) / Super-aged society (20% or higher)

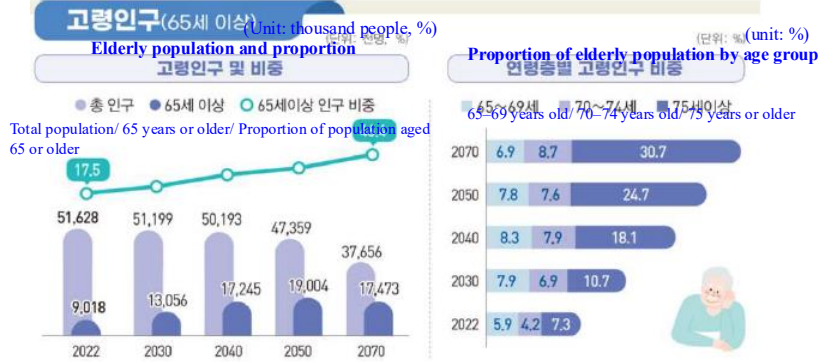


[Figure 1] Proportion of elderly population (age 65 or older) by region in 2023 (Data: Statistics Korea, Future Population Projection: 2020–2070)

As shown in **Figure 1**, as of 2023, there were as many as six super-aged regions in which the population over 65 exceeds 20%, including Jeollanam-do (25.5%), Gyeongsangbuk-do (23.9%), Jeollabuk-do (23.4%), Gangwon-do (23.3%), and Busan (22.2%). For Jeollanam-do, a whopping 25.5% of the population was over 65 years old, indicating that more than a quarter of the total population can be classified as part of the aging population.

Among the issues inherent in the phenomenon of the super-aging of the elderly population, another issue that cannot be overlooked is the proportion of the elderly population by age group. **Figure 2** shows two facts about the aging trend of South Korea’s population. One is that the proportion of the elderly population aged 65 and over continues to increase, in contrast to the overall population of South Korea, which continues to decline. The other is the proportion of the elderly population by age group. The proportion of the old-old, which are those aged 75 or older, was 7.3% as of 2022, making them the largest group among the age group aged 65 or older. This demographic is projected to continue to increase, to reach an overwhelming 30.7% by 2070.

Elderly Population (aged 65 or older)



[Figure 2] The elderly population of South Korea and the proportion of the elderly population by age group
(Source: Senior Citizen Statistics 2023)

While aging or super-aging is clearly predicted, what is the key topic raised by the fact that the proportion of the old-old continues to grow? The most significant topic is the issue of “elder care.”

Given the rapidly increasing number of old-old among the elderly population in South Korea, Kim, Hye-kyung (2005) examined the socio-demographic characteristics, health status, and social service needs of the old-old compared with those of the young-old. Kim found that the mental and physical health of the old-old was not only worse than that of the young-old, but their need for institutional care was also lower. Based on these findings, it appears that for the old-old, programs that support family caregiving (family care of older persons) may be more effective than public care services such as the long-term elder care system, or institutional care. Therefore, considering that the currently emerging social problems related to “elder care” may become more severe in rural areas that have already become super-aged societies, the purpose of this study is to propose a plan to build an elder care system through the reconstruction of rural village communities.

2. Status and issues of response measures to an extinction crisis

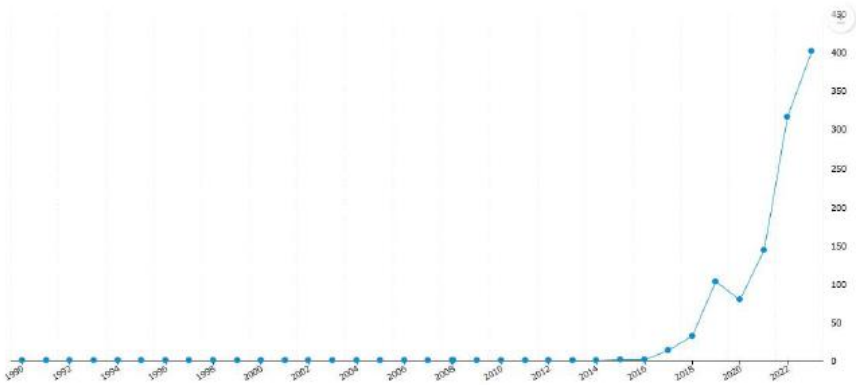
One of the major issues that South Korean society has paid attention to in recent years is the local or rural extinction crisis that is resulting from rapid population decline. This can also be confirmed by the recent focus on these issues by the media. The following table summarizes the number of articles per year with “local extinction” and “rural extinction” as keywords retrieved using BigKinds, a news big data service provided by the Korea Press Foundation.

<Table 2> Annual trends in the number of articles retrieved using the keywords “local extinction” and “rural extinction”

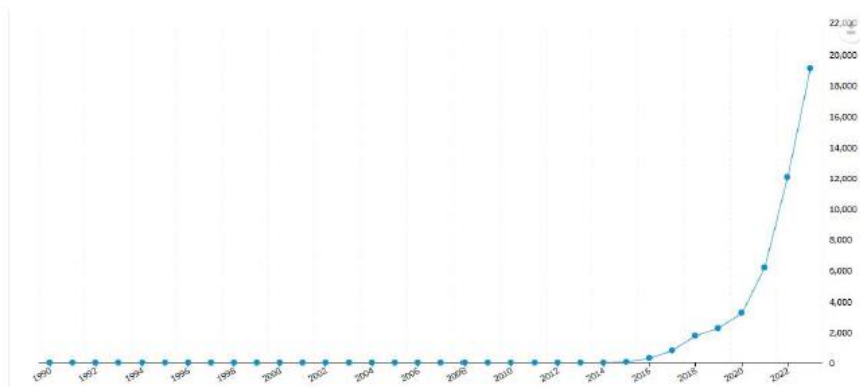
Year	Local extinction	Rural extinction	Note
2014	2	0	
2015	50	1	
2016	292	1	
2017	813	15	
2018	1,752	32	
2019	2,275	103	
2020	3,280	80	
2021	6,371	146	
2022	12,240	326	
2023	19,662	411	
2024	9,796	392	
Total	56,533	1,507	

Based on Table 2 above, news articles with the keywords “local extinction” and “rural extinction” began appearing in 2014 and 2015, respectively. There are a total of 56,533 and 1,507 news articles on “local extinction” and “rural extinction,” respectively, showing that reports on “local extinction” are overwhelmingly high in terms of frequency. However, as shown in *Figure 3* and *Figure 4*, the number of reports on both keywords has increased over the last three years, with the exception of 2024. This suggests that there is considerable interest in these issues in South Korean society.

메모 포함[u1]: 국문에 2016년이라고 되어 있는데 표를 보면 2015년인 듯 하여 2015년이라고 표기하였습니다.



[Figure 3] Annual trend in number of “rural extinction” reports



[Figure 4] Annual trend in number of "local extinction" reports

Then, to what is South Korean society's concern about these issues mainly connected? To understand this, here are some articles that have been presented in connection with the transition to an "aging" or "super-aging" society.

- (1) a. The aging of Japanese society mirrors the future of South Korea. **Empty houses and single-person households are on the rise. Due to the lack of labor, garbage piles up, and lonely deaths² become a social problem.** Local governments have established an emergency network with elderly households, frequently checking their status and regularly removing garbage. (*Gyeongnam Ilbo*, September 4, 2017)
- b. **Since super-aging will inevitably cause various social problems, including a decrease in the productive capacity of local communities and an increase in the burden of supporting the elderly,** it is necessary to develop customized strategies for each region along with response measures to prepare for super-aging. (*Jeju Ilbo*, May 20, 2019)
- c. An analysis suggests that South Korea's government debt could exceed its gross domestic product (GDP) in about 20 years. **This is because the cost of various social security and medical services is expected to rise rapidly, while the tax base is weakening due to a low birth rate and an aging population.** (*Hankyung Daily*, May 19, 2024)

The articles above are noteworthy in that they allow us to understand the real state of the social issues that certain local or rural areas are facing in the context of aging or super-aging becoming a reality. On the premise that the aging of Japanese society reflects the future of South Korean society, (1)-a presents that empty houses and single-person households will increase, garbage will pile up due to a lack of labor, and lonely deaths will become a social problem. (1)-b emphasizes that super-aging can cause problems such as a decrease in the productive capacity of local communities and an increase in the burden of supporting the elderly. Finally, (1)-c predicts that the cost of various social security and medical services may rise rapidly while the tax base is weakened due to the low birth rate and aging population.

As the articles of (1) show, the social problems that will arise from the transition to an aging or super-aging society seem to be diverse. It is no exaggeration to say that this situation has recently prompted the central

² Kodokushi (孤独死) or lonely death is a Japanese phenomenon of people dying alone and remaining undiscovered for a long period of time.

메모 포함[u2]: 일본에서 만들어져 영어권에서는 흔히 사용되는 용어가 아니라 임의로 각주를 넣었습니다.

government as well as all local governments to come forward and propose response measures to address these problems. The following examples show some aspects of these measures.

- (2) a. Accordingly, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has set up a promotion headquarters to actively respond to rural extinction by establishing a system that can fundamentally prepare for changes in rural population and structure. The promotion headquarters will announce plans to respond to rural extinction at the end of the year, including measures to restructure rural areas and revitalize jobs and investment based on agricultural/rural structural outlook, demographic, technological and environmental changes. (Naeil Newspaper, July 11, 2023)
- b. In the middle of this month, the government's "three types of projects to revitalize depopulated areas" attracted attention. They were included in the "2024 Economic Policy Directions" announced by the government earlier this year, and were proposed with more specific details this month. The key points are second homes, small-scale tourist complexes and region-specific visas. This is a policy that is bound to attract the attention of local governments, who have been worried about an imminent local population extinction crisis. It is hoped that the policy will be well implemented in accordance with its intended goal of increasing the population living in, visiting or settling in rural areas, and thus become a new source of energy for local revitalization. (Daegu Ilbo, April 28, 2024)
- c. On the 20th, the Ministry of SMEs and Startups (MSS) announced that it had held a contest for "2024 Regional Innovation Tasks to Respond to Local Extinction" in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and Security (MOIS), and preliminarily selected 22 excellent tasks. The regional innovation contest project is a program designed to create synergies in local extinction response policies; when a local small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) development project is planned to create jobs in a region, MSS and MOIS jointly support both the local SME development project (software) and the local extinction response fund (hardware). (Metro Economy, March 20, 2024)
- (3) a. Hadong-gun's policy to support a return to farming and rural areas (return-to-farm) was differentiated from that of other local governments, and above all, was both more systematic and more unconventional. Various return-to-farm support policies have been effective, including strengthening the function of return-to-farm support centers, expanding community-based experience programs, increasing support for return-to-farm education focused on field training, and supporting community activities with local residents. However, it was deemed more effective to take a more active and unconventional approach to solving housing and income issues, which are the biggest difficulties for people returning to farming or rural areas. (Gyeongnam Ilbo, December 28, 2023)
- b. Governor Kim said at the meeting, "To overcome the crisis of rural extinction, we need agricultural and youth policies that focus on 'people' and 'space'." He added, "Therefore, we must turn rural areas into vibrant spaces where young people can plan a successful future through various capacity-building and talent development programs, and measures to support youth entrepreneurship." (Geumgang Ilbo, April 28, 2024)
- c. Jeju City has decided to invest a budget of 39.25 billion won over a five-year period up to 2028 to improve living conditions in rural towns and villages. The city has been selected for the "Rural Living Area Revitalization Project" launched by the central government to prevent rural extinction, with its towns and villages as target areas. (KBS, April 26, 2024)

Among the above cases, (2) is a solution to the problem of local or rural extinction proposed at the national or central government level, and (3) is a solution proposed at the local government level. Looking at these solutions in more detail, it seems that the following measures have been proposed thus far.

<Table 3> Solutions to local/rural extinction problems presented at the national/central and local government levels

Authorities	Solutions	Note
National or central government	<p>① Establish a promotion headquarters to actively respond to rural extinction: restructuring of rural areas and revitalization of jobs and investments based on agrarian/rural structural outlook, demographic, technological and environmental changes</p> <p>② Promote three types of projects to revitalize depopulated areas: second homes, small-scale tourist complexes, and region-specific visas</p> <p>③ Hold a contest for regional innovation tasks to respond to local extinction: MSS and MOIS jointly support both the local SME development project (software) and the local extinction response fund (hardware)</p>	<p>Three types of projects: April 15, 2024, jointly promoted by government ministries</p>
Local governments	<p>① Promote policies to support return to farming and rural areas (Hadong-gun, Gyeongsangnam-do): Solving housing and income issues</p> <p>② Introduce agricultural and youth policies focusing on “people” and “space” (Cheongyang, Chungcheongbuk-do): various capacity-building and talent development programs, and measures to support youth entrepreneurship, etc.</p> <p>③ Promote the “Rural Living Area Revitalization Project” (Jeju City): To improve living conditions in rural towns and villages, a budget of 39.25 billion won will be invested over 5 years, through 2028.</p>	

As described above, central and local governments have proposed a wide variety of response plans for local or rural areas threatened with extinction (depopulation). In addition to investing an astronomical amount of public funds to carry out three types of projects³ or holding a contest for regional innovation tasks, a variety of measures have been planned and implemented that are so diverse that it is difficult to list them all. These include the promotion of “return-to-farm support policies” and “projects to revitalize rural living areas” at the local government level.

The issue is that despite the astronomical amounts of public funds invested at the national and local government levels, most policies have focused only on bringing in new populations, with almost no policies

³ Specifically, the following three policies have been jointly promulgated by government ministries.

- ❶ **Living population:** Seeking to expand the population sharing living space, not limited to the settled population.
→ Promote an influx of residents into depopulated areas by providing tax incentives when acquiring a “second home”
- ❷ **Visiting population:** To increase the visiting population, it is necessary to revitalize tourism considering regional characteristics.
→ Introduce small-scale tourist complexes with greatly simplified requirements, including designation procedures and size
- ❸ **Settled population:** Due to a shortage of labor in local/rural areas, the demand for labor inflow to such areas, including foreign labor, is increasing.
→ Support the settlement of foreigners by expanding the participation regions and quotas for region-specific visas.

focused on the original residents, particularly the elderly. This is analogous to trying to treat a critically ill patient who needs emergency surgery by only using external blood transfusions, rather than strengthening the patient's immune system.

So, what are the solutions? Section 3 proposes an enhanced community by expanding and reorganizing the role of “village community building (VCB)” movements or so-called “transition town” initiatives, which were developed to solve problems such as the ecological, environmental, or climate crisis. I would like to suggest that to ensure the quality of life of the elderly exposed to the crisis of super-aging in local/rural areas on the verge of extinction, it is necessary to establish a care system for the indigenous elderly in such an enhanced community.

3. Reconstruction of village communities and establishment of a care system

Since the late 1990s, “VCB” movements have been in full swing in Korean society, initiated by different local governments and organizations. They can be said to correspond to a trend of activating residents’ participation in urban planning through activities in which residents seek to develop their local communities by identifying problems that arise in their daily lives. The movements are involved in “cultivating a living foundation” that addresses and solves the problems of the living environment. In addition, they can be considered not only as “building a community” that restores relationships with neighbors and establishes communication channels and activity systems, but also as a “nurturing process” that fosters responsible and qualified healthy community residents into democratic citizens.

The accomplishments of “VCB” movements largely fall into two categories. One is that the movements serve as a means for residents living in the same neighborhood to enhance their relationships and public participation by solving various life problems and discovering and sharing cultural, historical, and natural resources surrounding the common ground called the community. Moreover, they become a shortcut to internally solving various problems that a city inherently faces, including the gap between rich and poor, jobs, environmental issues, resident conflicts, civic order, good use of leisure time, crime prevention, and community safety.

Importantly, “VCB” movements have recently expanded into “transition town initiatives,” which prepare a decarbonized community to address the climate crisis at the village level and build community resilience. The concept of transition that is ultimately pursued in “transition town” initiatives is to reimagine and rebuild the world we live in. Local activists voluntarily carry out various projects to strengthen the local economy and achieve local energy independence, while being interested in alternative living practices, shared technologies, reduction of energy costs and carbon emissions, local food movement, local economic growth, and active cooperation with activities in other regions.

Transition town initiatives, which began 100 years ago in Totness, Devon, UK, have spread around the world, and today there are over 10,000 transition towns in 50 countries. In South Korea, “Transition Town Eunpyeong” was first established in Eunpyeong-gu, Seoul in 2014 and has since spread throughout the country, with transition town initiatives currently being actively developed in many places.

It is important to note that transition town initiatives do not suddenly start one day; in general, the various “VCB” movements that developed earlier tend to expand into transition town initiatives. For example, the history of the “VCB” movement, which has been developed in a village called “Ilgok District” in Buk-gu, Gwangju Metropolitan City, is presented in the following picture.



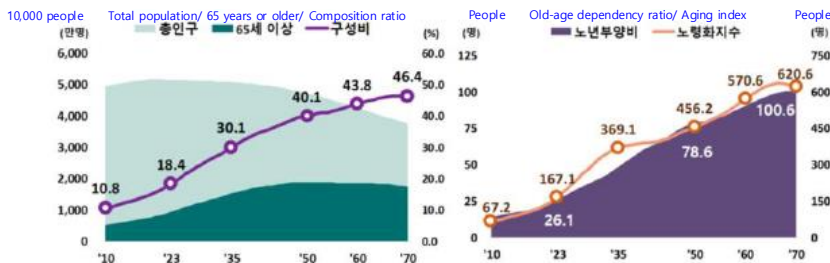
[Figure 5] Community Activities in “Ilgok Village,” Buk-gu, Gwangju Metropolitan City

As shown in the figure above, in 2010 Ilgok Village organized “Hansaebong Dure,” a farmers’ cooperative group, and launched “Hansaebong Forest Protection Activities.” Various community activities are ongoing, including “Ilgok Poomasi,” communal sharing of labor, “Ilgok Youth Culture House” and “Energy Conversion Village.”

The problem is that, as with the local/rural extinction crisis response measures of central and local governments discussed above, there is no care system for elderly people who are members of a community in “VCB movements” or “transition town initiatives.” The main reason may be that public care services, including long-term care for the elderly, are provided separately, but elder care is an issue facing all of humanity that transcends generations and gender, and should be regarded as a responsibility that everyone must share (Kim, Jin-Kyung, 2023). From this perspective, it would be necessary to reorganize a village community that cares for the elderly so that they can live together and face the last moments of their lives, not in a nursing home or hospital, but in the familiar space they know best—their own home and village community.

Another reason for the need to reorganize village communities, including through the establishment of an elder care system, is that the “old-age dependency ratio,” which refers to the elderly population supported by 100 people of working age, is expected to reach 26.1 in 2023, 48.6 in 2035, and 78.6 in 2050. The following Future Population Projections from Statistics Korea show this.

< Elderly population (aged 65 or older) and composition ratio > < Old-age dependency ratio and aging index>



Source: Statistics Korea, Future Population Projections: 2020–2070

[Figure 6] Estimation of elderly population and old-age dependency ratio (provided by Statistics Korea)

As shown in the statistics above, as the proportion of the elderly population continues to increase, the old-age dependency ratio continues to rise accordingly. In such a situation, if care for the elderly relies entirely on public services, it will exacerbate social conflict, including intergenerational conflict, which is likely to become another social crisis. The best approach seems to be one in which some parts of the services are solved by public services or systems, while a new system is established wherein the whole village comes together as one to provide or support elder care for services that can be addressed within the community.

5. Conclusions and Suggestions

The American sociologist Daniel Bell argued, “The state is too small for the big problems and too big for the small problems.” This underlines that as the process of globalization accelerates, linked to the global mobility of capital, the role of the state is gradually diminishing, while the importance of regions is increasing. (Kim, Khi-seong, 2023: 388).

So, what scale should solutions for “elder care,” the needs and demands of which are growing rapidly today, have? It seems that both the state and communities have a role to play. Given the scale of the old-age dependency ratio, which will continue to rise with the advent of a full-blown super-aging era, elder care requires the state to play a significant role, but it cannot permanently rely on public care services alone. There is an African saying that it takes a village to raise a child. Therefore, except for cases in which a specialized medical system needs to be established, as the saying goes, the issue of elder care also needs to be shifted in a direction in which the entire village sets up a common service site and solves all related problems together. It would be very desirable if people who have returned to their village on retirement, or young people who have decided to return to rural areas, could become active participants in such a community-building movement. As the climate crisis worsens by the day, people are likely to experience heat-related illnesses from heat waves or health threats from particulate matter. Under these circumstances, it seems that through a newly-established community system, village communities can play a new role in taking care of the elderly who are vulnerable to disasters, so that they do not become victims.

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