

Rural Municipalities' Tactics for Intergovernmental Lobbying to Secure Human Resources: A Comparative Study on South Korea and Japan

Akio Nawakura, National Federation of Depopulated Municipalities in Japan, Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines how rural local governments in Japan and South Korea lobby their central governments to secure human resources for agriculture. While both countries face similar challenges—aging populations, depopulation, and agricultural labor shortages—the study argues that their intergovernmental lobbying strategies differ significantly. Using a comparative case study of Japan and South Korea, the author analyzes policy documents, newspaper articles, and interviews. The findings show that Japanese local governments request not only financial assistance but also policy guidance, institutional frameworks, and informational support from the central government. This reflects the limited policy-analysis capacity of many Japanese local governments, which often lack dedicated research institutions. In contrast, South Korean provincial governments primarily lobby for increased financial support, such as subsidies. Unlike their Japanese counterparts, Korean provinces generally possess stronger research and planning capacities through provincial think tanks and Agricultural Research and Extension Services. As a result, they can design and implement policies independently and require fewer policy guidelines from the central government. The paper concludes that differences in local governments' policy-analysis capacity help explain variations in lobbying behavior. Where local governments have stronger analytical resources, they tend to seek funding; where such capacity is weaker, they seek both financial and informational support.

Keywords: local government, public administration, agriculture, human resources, Japan, South Korea

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Introduction: Key Question and Its Background

This study asks what local governments in rural areas request their central governments in intergovernmental lobbying to secure local human resources in agricultural sector focusing on the cases in Japan and South Korea.

Aging, population decrease, and labor shortage caused by them are common public policy subjects in many countries in East and Southeast Asia. While the Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Indonesia have achieved high economic growth based on industrialization, the growth promoted domestic migration from rural areas to urban ones. The share and the number of rural population of those countries, therefore, have decreased for decades.

The local authorities of the developed Asian countries have launched various measures to secure agricultural production and basic socioeconomic functions of those regions. Due to poor financial resources, however, the local governments, both provincial and municipal, often depend on grants and subsidies by their central governments. This encourages the local governments to lobby their central ones to expend more fiscal assistance on them.

Some previous studies have researched the local governments' measures and their styles to secure human resources in agricultural sector and shown that they are different by country. While some local authorities such as municipalities in Japan approach the subjects by policy networks with private actors, the others such as South Korea's cities and counties do based on high autonomy of governmental actors. This indicates that the request and tactics of local governments' lobbying on their central ones can also differ by country.

Based on the recognition above, the chapters below review how the local governments' intergovernmental lobbying to secure agricultural human resources are different by country focusing on the cases of Japan and South Korea.

Previous Studies and Research Gap

There are some previous studies on local governments' policies and measures to human resources in rural, particularly agricultural, areas. Ryan (2023) points out that labor shortage in agricultural sector is one of the common public policy subjects among developed countries today. The Ryan's study overviews agricultural sector of the OECD member states and argues that the labor and skill shortage of agricultural sector are commonly seen in the member states. Based on this, the Ryan's study suggests that the governments of the developed countries need to launch various measures to attract skilled workers to agricultural sector.

Also in developed Asia, the states have launched various measures to secure agricultural human resources. As Fukagawa (2021) and Sano (2021) point out, the governments of Japan and South Korea installed the programs to inject foreign workers to agricultural sector since the latter half of the 2010s. Those countries launched new visa programs to accept the workers from Southeast Asian countries to their agricultural sector. While the number of foreign agricultural workers in those countries has increased, however, the studies above indicate some serious policy problems on the alien labors in rural areas. As the most serious subject, the average farmland size per household in developed Asia is further small than Northern America and Western Europe (1–10ha in Asia while 30–100ha in the West). Due to the small size operation, most farming households in developed Asia can offer only seasonal work to foreign laborers.

In other words, the rural developed Asia seldom offers annual work for foreign workers. The studies above, therefore, indicate that foreign labor offers only partial solutions to the subject and that human resources measures in internal level play important role for rural developed Asia.

While the labor shortage in agricultural sector is one of the serious policy subjects for central governments, local government plays crucial roles to attract agricultural human resources. Nawakura (2025) compares agricultural human resource policies by local governments in South Korea and Japan focusing on the relations between public authorities and private actors. The Nawakura's study indicates that, while Japanese local governments prefer the policy method of networking with private actors such as agricultural cooperatives, the South Korean ones do top-down policy approach which local governments dominantly determine the measures independently from private actors.

In terms of the role of local government, Okutsu (2005) observes several cases of Japanese farmlands to seek skilled workers and describes the role of local authorities to assist the training on agricultural workforces. Because agricultural labor market in East Asia is not as institutionalized as that in Western Europe and Northern America, local authorities often play important role to coordinate demand and supply of workforces at “on site” levels.

Local government often cooperates with central government in agricultural policies, and it has been one of the major topics in the studies of agricultural politics. Halloran and Magid (2013) point out that local government often plays important roles in institutionalizing the policies and measures by central government. In the Asian context, OECD (2018) and Subiyantoro and Riswadi (2026) point out that local government plays the role to implement national government's policies at community levels in agriculture as well as other policy fields.

As seen above, the previous studies have described the features of population decrease and aging as public policy subjects and have analyzed central and local governments' countermeasures. On the other hand, those studies have remained some research gaps. The processes and their features of intergovernmental relations, particularly local government's tactics and strategy on central one, can be pointed out as part of the gaps. Existing studies have contributed to show how local government and the relations between local and central governments play important roles in agricultural policies, particularly those to secure agricultural human resources. The relations between local and central governments, intergovernmental relations in other words, however, is the concept to mean interactions between them. While many previous studies have analyzed the role of the local authority to implement the measures determined by the central government (top-down), also local government is thought to lobby the central one to maximize the local interests (bottom-up).

This study sheds light on the local government's bottom-up strategy and tactics to gain more policy resources to secure agricultural human resources in their regions. Due to low population density and demographic shrinking, local governments in rural areas are generally suffering from limited fiscal and personnel policy resources and depend on grants and subsidies by central governments. However, it does not mean that the local governments just follow the command of the central ones. Rather, as some previous studies in the United States indicates that local governments actively maximize their resources and interests by intergovernmental lobbying (Erikson et al., 2012; Powell, 2004). On the other hand, the tactics and contents of lobbying by local governments can be different in different countries. This suggests that the local government's requests and tactics to secure agricultural human resources can differ by

country. The sections below verify the processes and features of the intergovernmental lobbying in East Asia.

Case Selection and Research Methods

Japan and South Korea are developed East Asian countries which have experienced decrease and aging of rural population prior to other Asian countries. Traditionally, the two countries share structural features of agricultural operation, small-sized, family-owned, and rice-centered farming. The demographic shift from rural to urban areas in Japan began in the 1950s as its rapid industrialization began. While its urban population increased, the National Diet enacted the Emergency Measures for the Development of Depopulated Areas Law in 1970 (House of Representatives, n. d.). The law has been amended for five times and policy assistance on rural municipalities has been one of the most crucial subjects for the Japanese government (Cabinet Office, 2003). Also, the South Korea's National Assembly enacted the Framework Act on Low Birth Rate in an Aging Society in 2005 and has measured various policy programs for more than two decades (Korea Legislation Research Institute, n.d.). Both the two countries, to be short, so-called front runners of aging and population decrease in Asia.

While they combat the common policy subjects, Japan and South Korea show some differences each other. First, while the Japanese electoral local governance system was founded under the post-WW II US occupation in 1947, before the beginning of the miraculous development, South Korea installed its electoral local governance in 1991, after transitioning to a developed democracy. In terms of local governments' action to demographic shrinking and aging, the difference between the two countries appears clearer. The rural municipalities in Japan founded the National Federation of Depopulated Municipalities in 1970 and the Federation has lobbied the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication for over five decades (National Federation of Depopulated Municipalities in Japan, n.d.).

On the other hand, the municipalities in South Korea's demographically shrinking regions launched the Mayors' Council of Population Decreasing Regions in 2023, mostly after two decades since the enacting the Framework Act in 2005 (Mayors' Council of Population Decreasing Regions, n.d.).

Second, as a result of the timings and features of decentralization, the local governments in Japan and South Korea have different organizational characteristics in terms of policy tools. While every province in South Korea has its own think tanks to collect and analyze regional data on every policy field, for example, several prefectures such as Fukui and Tottori in Japan do not have such think tanks for local public policies (Local Think Tank Council of Japan, n.d.). In terms of agricultural human resources, every province in South Korea has their own organizations to train and educate agricultural human resources, Agricultural Research and Extension Services¹ while 42 out of 47 prefectures in Japan do not own public organizations for agricultural training and extension (National Agricultural College Council, n.d.).

The differences mentioned above are expected to influence the local governments' behavior to lobby the central ones and maximize their policy interests. Japan has the history of countermeasures to demographic shrinking over five decades. In this history over half a century, the rural municipalities' communication to the central government has been highly

¹ Agricultural Research and Extension Services in South Korea's provincial governments were formerly founded by the central government. In the 1990s, the services were transferred to local governments as a series of decentralization.

institutionalized. Rural areas' local governments annually release their own proposals and requests regarding national policies and lobby cabinet ministers of the central government every summer.² In the institutionalized and routine works of lobbying, governors and mayors request broader fiscal, personnel, and informational support by the central government as possible. In South Korea, on the other hand, the local governments' lobbying on the central government has not as institutionalized as that in Japan. Though the provincial governors regularly hold meetings to discuss public policies with President and some other high-ranked officials of the central government,³ the topics and the styles in the discussion are less institutionalized than those in Japan and is highly influenced by the will of governors, mayors and the President.

While the styles of intergovernmental lobbying in Japan have been highly institutionalized, as seen above, the local governments in Japan often lack their own think tanks to support policymaking. This suggests that the local governments in Japan have incentives to request the central government to support their policy making. As well as the degree of lobbying institutionalization, this organizational difference is also expected to influence the local governments' tactics to lobby the central government in terms of securing agricultural human resources.

The two sections below see two provincial governments' tactics in intergovernmental lobbying in terms of securing agricultural human resources: Akita Prefecture in Japan and South Gyeongsang Province in South Korea. Both the two are commonly provinces which are suffering from demographic shrinking, aging, and decrease of agricultural human resources. Also, both the two are not special administrative provinces.⁴ On the other hand, the two regions are different from each other on some organizational structures of agricultural policy implementation. While South Gyeongsang Province has had its own agricultural research and extension service organization, Akita Prefecture does not. Though the Prefectural government had its own college for agricultural training and research, the college was merged with the Akita Prefectural University in 1999 and no longer an independent research organization. Literature review on newspaper articles and governmental documents is employed as the methods of the analysis. The reviewed literature and the words by interviewees are interpreted narratively.

Case 1: Japan

Akita Prefecture is one of the regions in Japan to have faced the rapid aging and decrease of farmers. In May 2025, the Prefectural government published a paper to point out that more than 70% of the farmers in the Prefecture are over 65 y/o and it is an emergency policy subject to secure agricultural human resources (Division of Agriculture and Fishery, 2025). The Akita Sakigake Shimpō, a regional daily newspaper published in the Prefecture, insisted in its editorial on January 11, 2026, that the number of professional farmers in the Prefecture was only 23,435 in 2025 and had decreased by approximately 50% since 2005. Based on this rapid decrease of farmers, the editorial demanded the Prefectural government to promote its measures to secure agricultural human resources (Akita Sakigake Shimpō, 2026).

² For example, see Hokkaido Government (2026).

³ For example, see Yoon J. (2025).

⁴ Some provinces in South Korea such as Jeju and Gangwon are legally designated as special administrative regions and hold some fiscal privileges legally. Also in Japan, the central government has special subsidy programs for some prefectures such as Hokkaido and Okinawa. Both South Gyeongsang Province and Akita Prefecture are not the targets of those special programs.

The Akita Prefectural Government, as mentioned in the previous section, has released its own policy proposal (*Yobo* or *Yobosho* in Japanese) on the central government every year. The necessity to secure agricultural human resources appeared in the proposal in 2012 for the first time. In page 34 of the 2012 proposal, the Prefectural Government requested the central government to show its blueprint to secure next generation's farmers nationwide as well as the fiscal support for young new farmers (Akita Prefectural Government, 2012). The F/Y 2012, for Akita Prefecture, was the period of reconstruction from the 2011 Great Tohoku Earthquake and the Prefectural Government needed to concentrate its financial and personnel resources on the reconstruction projects. The Prefectural Government showed its recognition that, despite the priority to promote reconstruction, it is also an important policy subject to secure new farmers for its regional agriculture in future. The description, on the other hand, also points out that the Prefectural Government depended on the guidance of the central government to secure agricultural human resources. The demand for showing "blueprint" by the central government indicates, in other words, the Prefectural Government's recognition that the basic policy framework to secure agricultural human resources should be prepared not by the local government, but the central one.

In the mid-2010s, the request on securing agricultural human resources once disappeared from the annual proposal because the Prefectural Government shifted its agricultural policies to protect the interests of farmers in trade liberalization by the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement.

The request on securing agricultural human resources appeared again on the proposal in 2017. In page 22 to 24 in the proposal in 2017, the Prefectural Government showed three requests to the central government: Increase of fiscal support for middle-aged new farmers, institutionalization of foreign workers programs in agriculture, and showing policy framework of workforce coordination in agriculture (Akita Prefectural Government, 2017). The proposal, in other words, pointed out that the middle-aged personnels and foreign workers were major candidates to cover labor shortage in agricultural sector and requested the central government to promote them nationwide. Actually, the number of foreign workers in Japanese agriculture has increased since the 2010s. Due to the small size of farmland per household, on the other hand, the most agriculture operators in Japan, but for dairy farmers, can offer only seasonal, not year-around, work for foreigners. The request to show framework of workforce coordination reflected such backgrounds. As well as the request in 2012, in other words, the Prefectural Government showed its recognition that policy framework for securing agricultural human resources should be prepared by the central government.

Since 2018, the government of Japan has installed new legal framework to accept foreign workers including in agricultural sector (Ohashi, 2019). Also, private organizations such as agricultural cooperatives launched programs to coordinate workforce in agricultural sector in the 2020s (Hokuren Federation, 2021). Reflecting them, the request to show policy framework disappeared in the proposal in 2025. The proposal in 2025 requested the central government to secure the size of subsidies for young new farmers and active agricultural enterprises (Akita Prefectural Government, 2025).

The proposals above indicate that the prefectural government itself does not prepare policy frameworks to secure agricultural human resources and thinks that the state should do. This means that the prefectural government plays limited roles to offer its own frameworks and/or guiding principles to cities, towns, and villages in the prefecture. As a result, each city/town/village seeks its own ways to secure agricultural human resources. Kitaakita City, an

agricultural city located in the northern part of Akita prefecture, is an example. As well as other municipalities in the prefecture, Kitaakita City faces the subject of rapid aging and decrease of farmers (Nawakura, 2025). Though the City Government regularly holds the meetings to exchange information among farmers and local officers (Agriculture Committee of Kitaakita City, 2026), the Prefectural government plays the role to introduce some examples and support measures prepared by the central government. Mr. Hiroyuki Chiba, a chief officer of the Division of Industrial Policy, Kitaakita City Government, said to the author that he sought aged entrepreneurs and/or farmers in the city who have no successors depending not only on official information but also on “rumor” among ordinary residents. “Once we, the local officers, find the entrepreneurs and/or farmers without successors, we introduce the cases to private enterprises to support M&A,” said Mr. Chiba to the author.⁵ The episode of Kitaakita City indicates that the local governments request the central government to offer not only financial assistance but also institutional frameworks to secure agricultural human resources. As mentioned in the previous section, some local governments in Japan, including Akita Prefecture, do not have their own think tank to support policy making. Without sufficient resources for policy making at prefectural levels, city/town/village officers identify the targets of the governmental support, the farmers who do not have their successors, depending on rumors among local residents. The request by Akita Prefectural government as seen above, therefore, is thought to be the tactics to cover their poor policy resources.

Case 2: South Korea

While prefectural governments in Japan have mainly lobbied the central government in Tokyo individually,⁶ provincial governments in South Korea have preferred to lobby the central government collectively. The Governors’ Association of the Republic of Korea have issued 20 to 40 joint policy proposals on the central government per year since 2005 (Governors’ Association of the Republic of Korea, n.d.). The first proposal in terms of securing agricultural human resources was issued in 2018, the request to increase the central government’s fiscal assistance for seasonal foreign workers suggested by Gangwon Province (Governors’ Association of the Republic of Korea, 2018). Because most farm households are small-sized, as well as Japan, the Korea’s farmlands often employ foreign workers as seasonal ones, not annual ones. The proposal, therefore, requested the central government to upgrade policy support to accept seasonal foreign workers stably. The second case was the proposal suggested by South Jeolla Province to request the “nationalization” of farmers allowance (Governors’ Association of the Republic of Korea, 2021). Since the latter half of the 2010s, provincial governments were lobbied by private farmers associations to expend allowance for individual farmers in the name of 1) agriculture’s public interests such as irrigation and 2) offering incumbent farmers to continue their work in future. The proposal insisted that the central government should expend the allowance because agriculture’s public interests and functions are nationwide subjects.

The third case of the joint proposals in terms of securing agricultural human resources was the request to expand the target of financial support for youth farmers by the central government (Governors’ Association of the Republic of Korea, 2024). This proposal was suggested by the South Gyeongsang Provincial Government. The Proposal pointed out that the central government’s financial support to begin agricultural operation had targeted the people less than

⁵ The author’s interview on Mr. Hiroyuki Chiba in Kitaakita City on November 12, 2024.

⁶ Though the National Governors’ Association in Japan has conducted collective lobbying by governors on the central government, it has mainly employed on emergency issues such as recovery from natural disasters (National Governors’ Association of Japan, 2025).

40 y/o. Pointing out that there were large number of talented new farmers over age 40, the proposal requested the central government to include the people less than 50 y/o as the target of the support.

All of the three joint proposals above requested the central government to upgrade fiscal support for trainees of agricultural training and/or local governments as coordinators of agricultural human resources. Differently from the Japan's case as mentioned in the previous section, the provincial governments in South Korea have not emphasized the request to indicate policy guidelines and/or criteria in their intergovernmental lobbying on the central government. While the prefectural government in Japan's case requested not only financial resources but also informational and personnel ones, in other words, the Korean case simply requested finance by the central government.

The difference between the two countries can be partly explained by policy approaches by the central governments. While the Japan's central government has developed its policy support to secure agricultural human resources gradually, the government of South Korea has installed its support programs to promote internal urban-to-rural migration and foreign seasonal workers with top-down approach (Choi, 2019). Compared to the Japan's regional revitalization (*chiho sosei*) projects to promote internal migration of urban dwellers to rural areas, South Korea's return farm (*guinong guichon*) programs have had clear performance index and financial support.

The concentration of the provincial governments' request to financial support, however, cannot be explained by the central government's behavior. The author's interview on municipal government officers in Seoul, Daejeon, and Naju indicated that the central government just set the basic guideline for return farm program, one of the major policies to secure agricultural human resources in the 2010s, nationwide and the details of its operation were covered by the local governments' own efforts.⁷

Rather, the provincial governments' organizational capacity for policy research has also influenced their proposals on the central government. In the case of South Gyeongsang Province, the province's Agricultural Extension Services holds several researchers on agricultural operation, and they have analyzed how to secure agricultural human resources (Yoon et al., 2021). In addition, the province's Agricultural extension Services has held joint learning programs with other provinces' organizations to upgrade the researchers' analysis skills (Gyeongsangnam-do Agricultural Research & Extension Services, 2023).

As provincial governments themselves have analyzed how to implement specific measures to secure agricultural human resources, cities, counties and other local authorities in South Korea often follow the guidance and/or command by the provincial governments in securing agricultural human resources locally. Mr. Kim Dong-hoon, the director of the Jeju Agricultural and Rural Development Administration, told the author that the Provincial government played guiding role to hold events to advertise the region's agriculture for urban dwellers as a part of the measures to secure new agricultural human resources.⁸ This is contrary to the Kitaakita's case in Japan.

⁷ The author's interview on Mr. Jin Woo-yong, chief directors of the Seoul Agricultural Extension Center, Ms. Na Yoon-jeong, team leader of the Naju Agricultural Extension Center, and Mr. Lee Sang-dae, officer of the Daejeong Agricultural Center on August, 2014.

⁸ The author's interview on Mr. Kim Dong-hoon in Seoguiipo City, Jeju, on July, 2025.

Concluding Remarks

This study analyzed the features and tactics of local governments' intergovernmental lobbying to secure human resources in agriculture focusing on the cases of Japan and South Korea. Both the two countries have been the front runners in terms of farmers' aging and decrease. While previous studies have analyzed the central and local governments' countermeasures on them, the local governments' intergovernmental lobbying to secure agricultural human resources has been a research gap.

The author's research in the sections above indicates that the local governments in the two countries show different features in terms of intergovernmental lobbying to secure agricultural human resources despite similar policy subjects each other: While the Japanese local government, at least the case of Akita Prefecture, has requested the central government to offer not only financial resources but also informational and personnel ones, the provinces of South Korea have emphasized financial support in their request on the central government. The author's literature review points out that the local governments' capacity to research policy subjects by themselves, at least partly, influence the difference between the two countries.

The result of the research above indicates the importance of local governments' capacity to analyze their own policy subjects as well as financial resources. Local governments in demographically shrinking regions tend to lack the capacity of policy analysis due to the decrease in tax revenue. The Akita's case means that the local governments attempt to cover it by requesting the central government to show some policy guidance. In South Korea's case, contrary to the Japan's one, think tanks and some other research organizations have contributed to improve the local governments' informational capacity.

This is, however, a case study on some picked-up examples in the two countries. Interview on local officers nationwide and quantitative analysis on collective data are the subjects in future.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that M365 Copilot, an AI-assisted software, was used only in correcting grammatical and spelling errors. The author also declares that no other AI technologies have been used in the writing process of this paper.

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Contact email: republic_of_korea_1948@hotmail.com