

ARTICLE

Did Recent Amalgamations of Local Governments Change the Scale of Democracy?

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Abstract

Recently Japan saw a large wave of local government amalgamation. This undoubtedly increased the size of local governments. The main aim of these amalgamation is pursuit of scale economy and it is often argued that these amalgamations made the distance between the residents and the smallest sized local governments in Japan, the municipalities. This fact should have led to the increased scale of democracy. However, since Japan is seeing depopulation, especially in rural areas, this may not apply to rural municipalities. The author had a look in municipalities in Kyoto Prefecture and Oita Prefecture and found out that in the rural areas the scale democracy are not so much increased as the reduction in the number of municipalities suggests. This tendency can be observed more clearly when the number of labour force population, which can be considered as the most active member of local democracy, is taken into account.

1. The history of municipal amalgamation in Japan

Japan in modern times has seen three distinctive periods that saw plenty of municipal amalgamations.

The first one was in 1880s, when Japan's villages which had its own autonomous system in feudal social system was reorganised into about 15,000 of basic local governments. Before this wave of amalgamation, there were about 75,000 of small villages in Japan. This was implemented to make Japan's basic units of local government large enough to deal with the requirement of newly introduced Westernised local government system. This new system, for example, required these basic local governments to manage primary schools, attendance to which was made compulsory during that time. With the population of Japan growing at that time, this undoubtedly pushed up the size of basic local government units, which were

then called municipalities.

The second one was in the period of 1950s. After the introduction of new, more thorough local government system in the wake of the end of WWII, local governments in Japan were given considerably more tasks including the management of junior high schools which was made a part of compulsory education then, but their financial strength could barely cope with the new demands. So many municipalities experienced financial difficulties and one of the remedies the central government advocated was amalgamation of local governments. This was done along with other financial measures like introduction of the Local Allocation Tax system, which guarantees a certain level of financial capacity to every local government through transfer of money from the central government. The number of municipalities was reduced to less than four thousand, and even seen in a shorter span of about ten years, this reduced the number of municipalities by a third. This was done aiming for more economy of scale, and with the population in Japan still growing during this period this also pushed up the average scale of municipalities.

The third one was during the first decade of this century. On April 1, 2002, there were 3,218 municipalities. On December 1, 2017 there were 1,718 municipalities. So the number was nearly halved in 15 years of time.

There is one thing different in this time from other periods of mass amalgamations. As the author discusses in the following, the population of Japan peaked at the time of 2010 National Population Census and started to decline after that, which resulted in the decline of population at the time of 2015 National Population Census. This means that, although the average size of municipalities was increased by amalgamations seen in a short span, it may not be increased as it seems, if longer perspective is employed. Moreover, in areas where depopulation is more severe and the ageing of population is more eminent, the size of the population excluding that of the young ones in the school and of the elderly who are no longer economically and socially active, may not have increased so much as the size of the population in one municipality.

2. Recent change in Japan

Recently, Japan is faced with depopulation and, partly because of the fact that the depopulation is mainly caused by diminishing birth rate, Japan also faces ageing of population. The number of population declined for the first time at the time of 2015¹ National Population Census, which left the population at the time of 2010 National Population Census the largest for the time being. In this situation, Japan saw a large-scale amalgamation of municipalities, Japan's lowermost level local governments that include cities, towns and villages, as a result

of recommendation made by the central government, after the turn of the century.

These lower-tier local governments, municipalities, function as the basic units of local democracy. Their chief executive officers who are called mayors are elected by local residents and the members of their deliberative organ which is called a local assembly are also chosen through direct elections by residents. These arrangements are required by the Constitution of Japan. This means that these units function as decision making units for local matters. They are units to make decisions about how to allocate money available to them, raised through local taxes, transfers from the central government and so on, to purposes they choose. There are units primarily responsible for compulsory education schools, welfare, disaster prevention and firefighting, garbage collection, human waste disposal and many other basic needs of residents. They are in charge of economic development of the area, too. Also they work as units for the purpose of the National Health Insurance and the Long-term Care Insurance. This means that insurance fee for these schemes are calculated within these units and are different from each other's. These years, burden equalization schemes in the finance of these schemes are expanded with larger roles of the prefectures, the upper tier units of local governments, but still municipalities perform large roles in those schemes whose degrees of importance are definitely increasing in the ageing societies.

At the same time, as mentioned above, the number of municipalities was reduced from over 3,000 to a little more than 1,700 in just fifteen years. Naturally, this means that the average size of municipalities measured by population was pushed up. However, in rural areas where population decrease is especially conspicuous, this decline in number of municipalities may not have led and will not lead to the increased size of local units, especially when other indices are employed to measure the size of these units. In this paper, the author would like to call this concept of the size of local government units as the scale of democracy. This scale of democracy can be measured with various scales and those measured with other measures may not totally coincide with the scale measured with the population simply grasped, especially, when seen in a longer span.

In the following chapters, the author would discuss this matter of the scale of democracy making use of the population statistics.

3. Scale of democracy

The author intends to use the expression of the "scale of democracy" as the one describing the extent a local unit of democracy, a municipality, covers, in terms of the number of politically active persons in this paper. In short, and roughly speaking, this means how many politically active people are involved in one local government unit, a municipality, which deals

with political decisions concerning residents of the local government.

Most simply put, this “scale” reminds us of the one measured in total population. In this sense, the scale of democracy in the scenery of Japan’s local government has without doubt increased because of the amalgamations during 2000s. This is because the number of the lowest tier units, municipalities, which include cities, towns and villages has come down from over 3,000 to a little more than 1,700 in a bit more than a decade², while the total population of Japan has remained more or less the same³ in the same period, although, it has started to decline during the period.

However, there are reasons that led the author to think that this is not the whole picture.

First, one typical form of amalgamation that happened in Japan during this period is for the core city to annex surrounding towns and villages. In these cases, the amalgamation can be considered as the expansion of the city and the magnitude of the increase in the scale of democracy is usually not big in terms of proportion of the newly added parts to the original city. This is because the former core city usually has a much bigger population and proportionately speaking the added population of peripheral, newly added areas is not big. Rather than the dilution of democracy, neglect of the newly annexed semi-rural population by the urban population of the central area is the more often discussed topics in these cases.

Secondly, there are towns, and sometimes cities, which were newly formed through amalgamation of a few towns and villages which had been more or less equal in size. These are usually local governments in rural areas. In these cases, scale of democracy has been definitely increased in terms of politically active population, if you compare the scales of democracy before and after amalgamation. But since these local governments are usually located in rural areas, ageing of population is the worst in these areas. The picture might be different if one counts the scale of democracy not simply in terms of total population but in terms of population which excludes those too young or too old to be politically active, in longer span.

In order to see if this is true, the author examines cases in Kyoto Prefecture and Oita Prefecture, both of which are familiar to the author. Since both of these prefectures contain rural areas with depopulation problem which is typical in present time Japan and since they had extensive amalgamation promotions, these prefectures can offer good examples.

4. Cases in Kyoto Prefecture

Kyoto is a prefecture in Kinki area in the western half of Japan and it includes the City of Kyoto which was the capital of Japan from 794 to 1868 and now is the biggest attraction for tourists in Japan. The City of Kyoto also has the second largest concentration

of universities in Japan which makes its population young and being a part of the second largest metropolitan area in Japan, this part of the Prefecture is not going downhill in terms of population. The population of the City of Kyoto is still growing even though the growth rate is very small. Even with such an area in the prefecture, the total population of Kyoto Prefecture has slowly been declining after 2005. This is because the situation is very different in the northern part of the prefecture. In the areas outside commuting distance from the City of Kyoto, towns and villages are shedding population. Therefore, there has been a wave of municipal amalgamation in this area after 2005. Many of them were annexation by a core city of the surrounding towns and villages but the author would like to pay attention to two cases which seems to belong to the second category, which comprises mergers between somewhat equal local governments or amalgamation without a distinctive core.

The author focuses on two local governments which were born as a result of merger between more less equals. They are Kyotango City and Yosano Town. Their population statistics are shown in Fig.1.

The first case is a result of the merger of six towns, namely, Mineyama Town, Omiya Town, Amino Town, Tango Town, Yasaka Town and Kumihama Town. These are towns in the northernmost part of Kyoto Prefecture where depopulation is the worst in the prefecture. This merger resulted in the creation of Kyotango City. The local government acquired the status of a city but it is just because of the sheer weight of the population and it does not mean that the area was urbanised. The population of the city was 55,054 in the year 2015, the year of the last National Population Census, which is conducted every five years. This is large enough to become a city but if you have a look at the figure of 1980, when total population of Japan was still growing although there was a considerable migration from rural sides of the country to the urbanised industrialised centres, the area of the present City of Kyotango had a population of 72,966. This means a reduction of 24.5%, almost a quarter, in thirty-five years. When one looks at the figures of labour force population, which is defined as the population of those who are from 15 to 64 years old, the tendency is more pronounced. Labour force population in the area of those six former towns in 1980 was 45,131, and the figure for 2015 was 28,907. This means a reduction of 35.9%. Although this may not be directly related to the theme of this paper, reduction in younger people, those who are below 14 years old is even worse. In 1980, the young population in the area was 17,230. But in 2015 the city has only 6,700 youngsters. The reduction rate is as much as 61.1%. In 2015, there was only a third of the number of youngsters in 1980. The elderly population, the number of those 65 years of age and over, is the only gainer, which grew from 10,605 in 1980 to 19,421 in 2015. Elderly population grew by 83.1%.

This case is a merger of six towns. So at the time of merger, the scale of democracy can

be said to have been multiplied by six. However, if you consider the reduction in population over the time of 35 years, from 1980 to 2015, the scale is multiplied, roughly speaking, by 4.5. If one measures the scale by the labour force population, the scale is multiplied by something a little less than four.

The second case is the merger of three towns, called Kaetsu Town, Iwataki Town and Nodagawa Town. They are also towns located in the northernmost part of Kyoto Prefecture and do not have modern industries. After the merger, they became Yosano Town, still a town. The population of the town was 21,834 in the year 2015. The figure for 1980 in the area of the present town of Yosano was 28,061. This means a reduction of 22.2%, nearly a quarter in thirty-five years. When one looks at the figures of labour force population, the tendency is clearer here, too. Labour force population in the area of those three former towns in 1980 was 17,192, and the figure for 2015 was 11,610. This means the reduction of 32.5%. In 1980, the young population in the area was 6,639. In 2015 the town had only 2,688 of those aged less than 15. The reduction rate is as much as 59.5%. On the other hand, the elderly population in 1980 was 3,860 and the corresponding figure in 2015 was 7,498. Elderly population grew by 94.2%.

This case is a merger of three towns. So at the time of merger, the scale of democracy can be said to have been multiplied by three. However, if you consider the reduction in population over the time of 35 years, from 1980 to 2015, the scale is multiplied, roughly speaking, by 2.5. If one measures the scale by the labour force population, the scale is multiplied by something a little more than two.

In both cases, the scale of democracy is not so much increased seen in the span of 35 years.

Fig.1. Population in the area of Kyotango City and Yosano Town

	1980	2015	Change in %
Kyotango City			
Population	72,966	55,054	-24.5%
Labour Force population	45,131	28,907	-35.9%
Elderly Population	10,605	19,421	83.1%
Youngster Population	17,230	6,700	-61.1%
Yosano Town			
Population	28,061	21,834	-22.2%
Labour Force population	17,192	11,610	-32.5%
Elderly Population	3,860	7,498	94.2%
Youngster Population	6,639	2,688	-59.5%

(The total population does not always tally with the aggregate of Labour Force Population, Elderly population and Youngster Population because there can be some whose age is not certain.)

(National Population Census 1980 and 2015)

5. Cases in Oita Prefecture

Oita is a prefecture on Kyusyu Island, the western most part of Japan. It is farther from the metropolitan areas and industrial centres than Kyoto Prefecture. Therefore, the total population of the prefecture has started to decline much earlier. It started to decline after 1985. This is because the situation is very different in the rural part of the prefecture. The total population was 1,250,214 in 1980 but in 2015 it is 1,166,338. There has been a wave of municipal amalgamations in this area, too, after the turn of the century. Most of them were annexation by a core city of the surrounding towns and villages but there still are three cases where smaller towns and villages merged among themselves and became a city. Their population statistics are shown in Fig.2.

The first one is the merger of five towns and two villages, namely, Mie Town, Kiyokawa Village, Asaji Town, Ono Town, Chitose Village and Inukai Town, which created Bungo-ono City. The local government acquired the status of a city because of the size of the population. The population of the area now included in the city was 51,975 in the year 1980 and was 36,584 in 2015. This means a reduction of 29.6%, almost 30%, in thirty-five years. When one looks at the figures of labour force population, the tendency is more pronounced. Labour force population in the area of those seven former towns and villages in 1980 was 34,188, and the figure for 2015 was 17,783. This means a reduction of 48.0%. Reduction in the number of younger people, those who are below 15 years old is even worse. In 1980, the young population in the area was 9,751. But in 2015 the city has only 3,826 young people. The reduction rate is as much as 60.8%. The elderly population grew from 8,036 in 1980 to 14,896 in 2015. Elderly population grew by 66.1%.

This case is a merger of five towns and two villages. So at the time of merger, the scale of democracy was multiplied by seven. However, if the reduction in population over the time of 35 years is considered, from 1980 to 2015, the scale is multiplied, roughly speaking, by five. If one measures the scale by the labour force population, the scale is multiplied by 3.5.

The second case is the merger of three towns, called Hazama Town, Showa Town and Yufuin Town. They became Yufu City. The population of the city area was 34,708 in the year 1980 and 34,262 in 2015. This means a reduction of only 1.3% in thirty-five years. This is because Yufuin Town made one of the most conspicuous success of local revitalisation projects in Japan. But even there, when the figures of labour force population are referred to, they show the reduction from 22,996 in 1980 to 18,821 in 2015, a reduction of 18.2%. The younger population showed worse reduction from 7,305 in 1980 to 4,288 in 2015. The reduction rate is 41.3%. The elderly population in 1980 was 4,407 and it was 11,009 in 2015. Even with better situation in total population, the elderly population grew by 150.0%.

This case is a merger of three towns. So at the time of merger, the scale of democracy was multiplied by three. However, if you consider the reduction in the labour force population, the scale is multiplied by something around 2.5. Even at a place where local economy is doing well, the population is ageing. Still there are faring better than most of the surrounding areas.

The third case is the merger of four towns, called Kunimi Town, Kunisaki Town, Musashi Town and Aki Town. They became Kunisaki City. The population of the city area was 40,504 in the year 1980 and 28,647 in 2015. This means a reduction of 29.3% in thirty-five years. The figures of labour force population were 25,262 in 1980 and 14,184 in 2015, a reduction of 43.9% in the thirty-five years in between. The younger population showed worse reduction from 7,493 in 1980 to 2,796 in 2015. The reduction rate is 62.7%. The elderly population in 1980 was 7,749 and it was 11,551 in 2015. The elderly population grew by 49.1%.

This case is a merger of four towns. So at the time of merger, the scale of democracy was multiplied by four. However, if you consider the reduction in the labour force population, the scale is multiplied by something around 2.5.

In all cases the scale of democracy did not go upwards as it seems, seen in the time span of 35 years.

Fig.2. Population of Bungo-ono City, Yufu City and Kunisaki City

	1980	2015	Change in %
Bungo-ono City			
Population	51,975	36,584	-29.6%
Labour Force population	34,188	17,783	-48.0%
Elderly Population	8,036	14,896	66.1%
Youngster Population	9,751	3,826	-60.8%
Yufu Town			
Population	34,708	34,262	-1.3%
Labour Force population	22,996	18,821	-18.2%
Elderly Population	4,407	11,009	150.0%
Youngster Population	7,305	4,288	-41.3%
Kunisaki City			
Population	40,504	28,647	-29.3%
Labour Force population	25,262	14,184	-43.9%
Elderly Population	7,749	11,551	49.1%
Youngster Population	7,493	2,796	-2.7%

(The total population does not always tally with the aggregate of Labour Force Population, Elderly population and Youngster Population because there can be some whose age is not certain.)

(National Population Census 1980 and 2015)

In Oita Prefecture, there are also three towns and one village which did not merge with others during the time of amalgamation wave in 2000s. One of them, Hiji Town, is near Beppu and is part of the urbanised area adjacent to the City of Oita. Its population is growing. However, other three local governments are losing population. Their population statistics are shown in Fig.3.

When one adds up the population of those two towns and one village, the total in 1980 was 40,416 and the total was 27,549 in 2015. This area has been covered by the same number of local governments through these 35 years. So the average size of a local government in 1980 in terms of total population in this area was 13,472. Corresponding figure for 2015 was 9,153. The size of a local government in terms of total population has declined by 32.1%.

If the labour force population of those two towns and one village are added up, the total in 1980 was 25,992 and was 13,983 in 2015. Then the average size of a local government in terms of labour force population in this area was 8,664. Corresponding figure for 2015 was 4,661. The size of a local government in terms of labour force population has been reduced by 46.2%. This is even bigger than the reduction in the average size in terms of total population.

So it is quite clear that without amalgamations, the scale of democracy in general would have been reduced to a considerable degree.

Fig.3. Population of Kusu Town, Kuju Town and Himejima Village

	1980	2015	Change in %
Kusu Town			
Population	22,775	15,823	-30.5%
Labour Force population	14,718	8,382	-43.0%
Elderly Population	2,828	5,552	96.3%
Youngster Population	5,229	1,873	-64.2%
Kuju Town			
Population	14,407	9,645	-33.1%
Labour Force population	9,233	4,672	-49.4%
Elderly Population	2,034	3,915	92.5%
Youngster Population	3,140	1,033	-67.1%
Himejima Village			
Population	3,234	1,991	-38.4%
Labour Force population	2,041	929	-54.5%
Elderly Population	471	891	89.2%
Youngster Population	722	171	-76.3%

(The total population does not always tally with the aggregate of Labour Force Population, Elderly population and Youngster Population because there can be some whose age is not certain.)

(National Population Census 1980 and 2015)

To have a look at this phenomenon in a bigger picture, the author would like to see the trend observed in Oita Prefecture when the City of Oita, the prefectural capital still gaining population is excluded from the statistics. Oita Prefecture is a prefecture with more rapid depopulation than the average of Japan, having depopulation already started after 1985. Total population was 1,228,931 in 1980 and after showing the highest figure of 1,250,214 in 1985, it came down to 1,166,338 in 2015. Compared with the figure in 1980, the figure for 2015 shows a decline of 5.1%. In the prefecture, the prefectural capital, the City of Oita shows a different tendency and, absorbing people moving from rural sides of the prefecture, still keeps upward trend in population. If one aggregates the population of all other parts of the prefecture than the City of Oita, and see the trend, the same trend as other rural local governments can be observed.

Total population in the area outside the City of Oita and two other towns, Saganoseki Town and Nozuhara Town, which merged with the City of Oita in 2005 was 843,296 in 1980 and the figure for the same area in 2015 was 688,192. This shows a reduction of 18.4%. This is a much greater decline than that of the whole prefecture. Just by excluding the capital city of the prefecture, the picture changes drastically.

Oita prefecture in 1980 had 58 cities, towns and villages. Average size of population of a municipality in the prefecture was 15,333, excluding the City of Oita and two other towns which later joined the City of Oita. In 2015, the number of municipalities was 18 and so excluding the figure for the City of Oita, the figure of average size of a municipality was 40,482. This shows an increase of 164.0%. The average size is about two times and half more.

If you turn to the labour force population, it is more clearly shown that the size of democracy has not increased so much. Labour force population in the area outside the City of Oita, Saganoseki Town and Nozuhara Town was 540,294 in 1980 and the figure for the same area in 2015 was 367,945. This shows a reduction of 31.9%. The rate of decline is much greater than that of the whole prefecture and almost twice as large. Here, too, the picture changes drastically by excluding the capital city of the prefecture. In 1985 the average size of labour force population in those 55 municipalities was 9,987. In 2015, the number of municipalities was 18 and so excluding the figure for the City of Oita, the figure of average size of a municipality was 21,644. This shows an increase of 116.7%. This shows that the scale of democracy is a little more than doubled in these 35 years in the area outside the City of Oita in Oita Prefecture.

If one looks at the population of elderly people, 65 years old and above, the picture is again very different. In 1980 Oita Prefecture had only 144,240 of elderly people. In 2015 this number has grown to 351,745, which shows the increase of 143.9%. Interestingly, this figure grew very fast in the City of Oita, where the elderly population of 29,353 in 1985 has grown

to 116,354, showing a 296.4% increase. In the area excluding the City of Oita, the figure in 1985 was 114,877 and the figure in 2015 was 235,391. This means an increase by 104.9%.

Referring to the young population, in 1985 Oita Prefecture had as many as 266,502 of young people. By 2015 this number has declined to 146,413, which shows a decline of 45.1%. The figure for the City of Oita was 97,349 in 1985 and it still keeps 66,116, albeit a decrease of 32.1%. In the area excluding the City of Oita, the figure in 1980 was 169,135 and the figure in 2015 was 80,297. This means a decline by 52.5%. Now there was less than half the number of youngsters in the area.

Oita Prefecture is a prefecture where municipal merger went further ahead and the rate of reduction of the number of municipalities is the 5th highest among 47 prefectures in Japan. However, with high than national average depopulation, the scale of democracy did not go up so much as the number of municipalities suggests in 35 years.

Fig.4. Population of Local Governments in Oita Prefecture (City of Oita and others)

	1980	2015	Change in %
Oita Prefecture			
Population	1,228,931	1,166,338	-5.1%
Labour Force population	808,130	657,169	-18.7%
Elderly Population	144,240	351,745	143.9%
Youngster Population	266,502	146,413	-45.1%
City of Oita			
Population	385,635	478,146	24.0%
Labour Force population	258,836	289,224	11.7%
Elderly Population	29,353	116,354	296.4%
Youngster Population	97,349	66,116	-32.1%
All Other Area			
Population	843,296	688,192	-18.4%
Labour Force population	549,294	367,945	-33.0%
Elderly Population	114,887	235,391	104.9%
Youngster Population	169,153	80,297	-52.5%

(The total population does not always tally with the aggregate of Labour Force Population, Elderly population and Youngster Population because there can be some whose age is not certain.)

(National Population Census 1980 and 2015)

6. Observations

As the author wrote at the beginning, "scale of democracy" can be measured by many things. Usually, one think of measuring it by the scale of population, but in a country like present day Japan, this may be misleading. The structure of population is changing with a clear direction, because of ageing of population. Especially on rural side of Japan this tendency is eminent and ageing of population is progressing fast.

In these rural areas, elderly population is multiplying, and labour force population, who are the earners in communities, is diminishing. This diminishing of labour force population is partly cancelled out, when seen in percentage, by the diminishing of the younger population. In other words, the labour force population does not diminish as the elderly population grow, because the younger population is diminishing even faster.

Another point which can be interesting is the number of voters. However, even though all elderly population are voters, they are not all active members of the community. Also the law concerning suffrage was changed recently and the suffrage which had been given to those aged 20 and above is now given to those aged 18 and above⁴. This makes the matter complicated and is the reason the author does not touch upon this matter in this paper.

This paper tries to show that in the big scale amalgamation of municipalities in Japan after the turn of the century, although it is usually accepted that the scale of municipalities in Japan was made larger in the process of pursuit of economy of scale, it is true that the scale of democracy was not so much increased as it seems.

In the cases shown above, in rural part of Japan, where small scale local governments are located, if you measure the scale of democracy with the scale of labour force population, the change is not as big as it seems. If one takes accounts of the diminishing young population, which predicts further and rapid decrease in population in very near future, one may even say that the increase in the scale of democracy will soon be restored to its original level.

Endnotes

¹ National Population Census is conducted every five years.

² At the end of March, 2000, the number of municipalities in Japan was 3,229 and ten years after that time, at the end of March, 2010, the number was 1,727. Now the number is 1,718. (As of the end of December, 2017)

³ The total population as of October 1, 2000 was 126,925,843 and the total population as of October 1, 2010 was 128,057,352.

⁴ The change was introduced in 2015.

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