

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Empower

Encourage

Inspire

'Making a Difference' articles shine a spotlight on and spread the word about individuals who are making a difference and leaving their mark in the community, business world and the environment.



Connecting the global with the local to revitalize Japan

SOSEI 
PARTNERS
-BOUNDLESS-

*How one man is helping drive
Japan's rural revitalization*

DENNIS CHIA
CEO and founder of BOUNDLESS
and Sosei Partners

10-SECOND BRIEFING

OBJECTIVES...

- To learn about the challenges facing rural Japan and innovative solutions to these problems.
- To contribute to the revitalization movement by injecting fresh and international perspectives.
- To ultimately bring wisdom and solutions out of Japan to share with the world.

Shuttered houses, schools and businesses – Japan's countryside has been hollowing out for years but while many country people are heading out to the big cities, **Dennis Chia**, CEO and founder of **BOUNDLESS** and the [Sosei Partners](#) regional revitalization project is increasingly heading in to the countryside to determine ways to revitalize the nation's rural areas.

Environment writer Jon Walsh checked in with Dennis to discover the massive ramifications of an emptying countryside, how he is encouraging the international community to engage with Japan's rural regions and learn about their charms and challenges they face, and his plans for a sustainable future.

Shrinking rural populations driving decline

Blessed with rich natural resources and a unique culture, Japan produces a potpourri of treasures ranging from fresh foods to exquisite traditional crafts. Behind these attractions lies a wealth of wisdom passed down through generations, intricate craftsmanship, and methods and ideas that can lead us to a sustainable future.

However, this tide of creativity, knowledge and experience is rapidly going out: Japan has been struggling to deal with depopulation in rural areas, an aging population, and the decline of primary and traditional industries.

Sosei Partners participants with director of 'Ishinomaki 2.0.'



“This phenomenon isn’t just happening in Japan but around the world, and the impact goes far beyond simply a shrinking of rural populations.”

For example, 60% of Japan’s municipalities will see their populations halved by 2050, and the percentage of people aged 65 years and over will increase from 25% (2014) to 50% (2040). The unipolar concentration of Japan’s population in Tokyo means that the suburbs and rural regions are seeing rapid declines in population, economy and industry.

This phenomenon isn’t just happening in Japan but around the world, and the impact goes far beyond simply a shrinking of rural populations; it also involves an irreversible loss of cultures and traditions, loss of our connection with the environment and our ability to produce our own food and energy, and the destruction of nature due to disruption of ecosystems.

Other countries facing similar issues

What motivated Dennis to start BOUNDLESS? “I became interested in social problems and sustainability after the Great East Japan Earthquake when it opened my eyes to the reality out there faced by Japan and the world,” the Singaporean says, adding that he was involved in several organizations and projects with such visions prior to starting his social business.

As Dennis traveled extensively around Japan, he became more concerned about the challenges the nation was facing, and the fact that many developed countries are or will face similar issues in the near future.

“I was an international student when I first came to Japan in 2008, so I could see both the international and local sides and the glaring gap between the two,” he recalls. “In other words, we have an increasing number of international people in Japan who are actually interested in the rural parts of Japan, but there is virtually no meaningful connection between the two.

That’s where Dennis steps in. In fact, the idea of connecting the global with the local was what drove him to launch the Sosei Partners project in 2017 based on three key objectives:

1. To learn about the challenges facing rural Japan and innovative solutions to these problems.
2. To contribute to the revitalization movement by injecting fresh and international perspectives.
3. To ultimately bring wisdom and solutions out of Japan to share with the world.

INFORMATION

- [What we do](#)
- [Why we do it](#)
- [Comments from past participants of Sosei Partners.](#)

BOUNDLESS



Sosei Partners participants visit Hiyoriyama Park in Ishinomaki

Through the Sosei Partners project, Dennis organizes learning programs and creates an empowerment platform for the international community in Japan by connecting them with regional governments to realize regional revitalization and sustainable development.

Gaining trust is biggest challenge

What have been the most significant challenges Dennis faced while starting out, and how did he overcome them?

Besides bureaucratic rules that made it difficult to register his company, Dennis says that gaining trust from and building relationships with different parties was a big issue. “To connect both the international community and locals in rural Japan, I need to gain trust from both sides,” he explains. “This, I believe, was and still is the biggest challenge I face. I have slowly built rapport with international students, but it will take time for me to gain recognition and credibility from the students. I need to make the benefits and merits clear so that they will join me, especially because students usually don’t have the money to pay for extracurricular activities. I started off with my friends and juniors from universities, and slowly got the message spread around by word of mouth.”

On the other hand, he adds, local communities in rural Japan can be very conservative, and it is virtually impossible for an outsider to go into a local region to try anything. How does Dennis address this?

“I get acquaintances who already have a local connection, build a relationship of trust with them first, and then get them to bring me in,” he explains.

“Even after I am allowed into the community, it takes time for me to build trust. People in local communities are actually very nice, but perhaps their image of foreigners is not accurate or very positive. My job is to alter that image subtly and convince them that we are not there to make money out of them, but instead we are there to work with them.”

The other major challenge was turning his initiative into a sustainable business.

“Like all businesses, and especially social businesses, it is difficult to sustain,” Dennis explains. “I need to balance making profits and creating social good and benefits for all parties involved.”

Revitalization projects promoting interactions

Dennis has organized several revitalization projects all over Japan, from the small forest town of Shimokawa in northern Hokkaido and the town of Urahoro in Eastern Hokkaido, to the coastal city of Ishinomaki in Miyagi.

SOSEI PROJECTS

ISHINOMAKI

Learn about the social innovation created in the coastal city of Ishinomaki after being devastated by the world’s costliest disaster.

[More](#)

SHIMOKAWA

Learn about the sustainable use and innovative management of local resources in Shimokawa, Hokkaido.

[More](#)

URAHORO

Examine the effective utilization of local resources in Urahoro in eastern Hokkaido

[More](#)

What you can gain from joining Sosei Partners

1. **ENGAGE** – Meet local government leaders to understand *chiho sosei*, or regional revitalization
2. **CONNECT** – Meet residents of rural Japan to learn their culture and traditions
3. **EXPLORE** – Travel the off-the-beaten tracks of rural Japan and see its charms (local food, scenery, historical sites, etc.)
4. **EXPERIENCE** – Take part in workshops that will teach you how local products are made and learn how organizations have implemented innovative ideas to bring economic impact to these communities
5. **CREATE** – Help communities solve real-world problems and be part of projects that are meaningful and have sustainable impacts
6. **CONTRIBUTE** – Use your time, energy and other resources to address an issue that puts the future of Japan on the edge.

Sixty three participants (including non-students) from 27 different nations have so far participated, and each project in every region has slightly different learning points and purposes as projects are adjusted according to the needs and visions of each place and their people.

The most common project currently is a learning program that enables international students to interact with Japanese locals and learn about their local culture, challenges and ongoing revitalization projects.

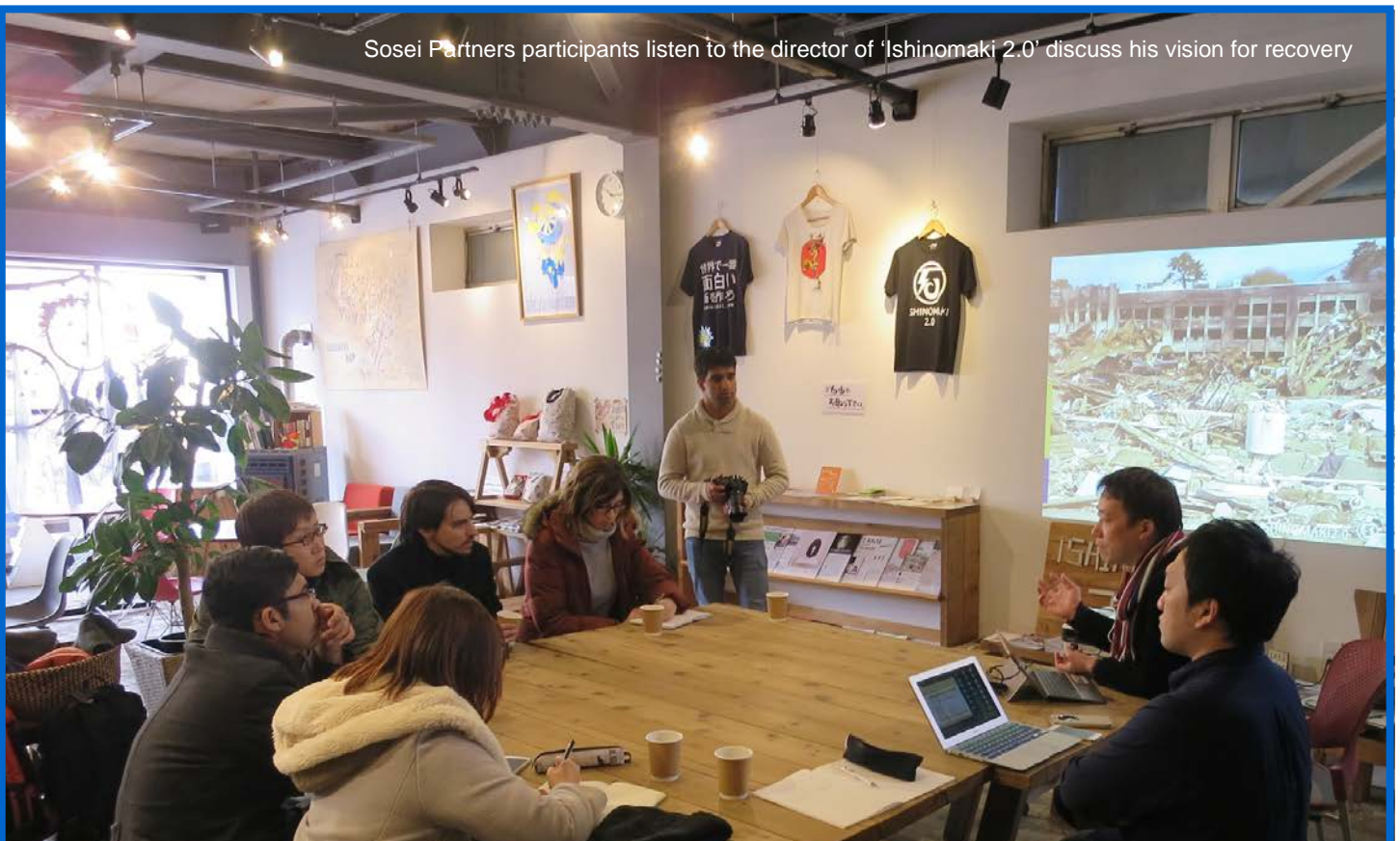
Touching on feedback he has received, Dennis says that in many places he has worked in, the locals barely have any opportunities to meet foreigners, so when he connects international students from lesser-known countries, the locals are happy to meet them.

“One common feedback, which is extremely simple, is that they enjoy interacting with the international students. I think this is most important as having fun together is the best way to bridge gaps and solve problems together.”

Despite rural Japan’s multitude of challenges, Dennis is aware that many Japanese are trying hard to come up with innovative solutions to solve these problems, which he believes is extremely valuable, and something that the world can and should learn.

“There is a lot more that I could do to get more students involved,” Dennis says about connecting students to revitalization projects. “I wish more universities and institutes would be more cooperative in helping me promote to their students. I need to convince universities that what I am doing is beneficial for the students and society.”

Sosei Partners participants listen to the director of 'Ishinomaki 2.0' discuss his vision for recovery



Besides travelling to regions in Japan where Sosei Partners' projects are taking place, participants meet locals and possibly local government leaders to learn about *chiho sosei*, or regional revitalization, from a macro perspective and learn what local government has done, is doing, and what kind of help is needed. Regarding his strategies to attract more non-student participants, Dennis says he hopes to get companies involved. "This is one way to drive profits to make the business sustainable."

Solutions must come from locals

What are the biggest problems Dennis is seeing in the Japanese countryside, and in what ways does he think Sosei can contribute to solving them? "The biggest issue is declining populations due to the outflow of young people," he points out. "The main reason for this is the lack of desirable employment. For example, not many young people are interested in taking up farming, partly because it is not profitable, and this is due to various reasons. Without employment, young people will leave. With no young people, there will be no (more) children, and schools will close, and this leads to a vicious cycle."

This, Dennis emphasizes, is a complex issue that varies from place to place. "I can't possibly revitalize every part of the countryside, but I think there are some places in Japan that have potential to revive. These are the places that I am working with now – areas with innovative and forward-looking mindsets, future-oriented policies and enterprising young people living there. The solution has to come from the locals. I am just there to provide an international perspective and possibly help them connect to the global stage."



Japanese don't want to lose regional treasures

What key points has Dennis learnt about Japan and Japanese people through engaging in revitalization projects? "Rural Japan still has a lot of charm and hidden gems," he says. "The beautiful satoyama scenery and rich traditional culture are precious. I think this is one big reason why many Japanese are trying so hard to revitalize the rural regions – they don't want to lose these treasures."

Noting that this is a highly debatable and controversial point, Dennis says he believes that Japanese are actually open to foreigners. "It is just a problem of communication. There may be lots of misunderstandings and negative images of foreigners in rural Japan, but I think it takes time to overcome these misunderstandings."

What motivates and drives Dennis in his work? "I think it is my love to meet new people and learn about cultures," he says. "My work allows me to meet lots of interesting people and connect them for a

good cause.

On the other hand, I love Japan and I don't want it to lose its charms – which is its culture and rural areas. I am positive that by constantly connecting international students to rural Japan, we will see change in the next three years or so. My focus is now in Ishinomaki, Shimokawa and Urahoro. Let's see how these three places will change."

"My next three steps," Dennis says about his expansion plans, "are to get more international people involved, encourage more companies to get involved, and continue building harmonious relationships with local communities. Ultimately, I hope that I can create a model that can be replicated outside Japan."

Contact

Dennis Chia

E-mail: dennis@bound-less.org

URL: www.soseipartners.com