

The Role of Care Farms in Rural Revitalization: A Qualitative Study in Japan from the Managers' Perspective

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Abstract. Japan's rural regions face intertwined challenges of farmland abandonment, labour shortages, and population decline, while people with disabilities encounter persistent barriers to employment and social participation. To investigate how care farming contributes to rural revitalization, we conducted a qualitative study using purposive sampling of 17 exemplary initiatives officially recognized by MAFF across eight regions. Data were collected through site visits, field observations, and semi-structured interviews with farm managers. Through inductive grounded theory coding in NVivo, five domains of impact emerged: (1) utilization of abandoned farmland, (2) agricultural experience and education, (3) branding and economic integration, (4) regional communication and coexistence, and (5) inheritance of traditional culture. While exemplary cases demonstrated how care farms can restore idle land, foster inclusive labour exchange, and revitalize local traditions, structural barriers persist. Most initiatives remain at early stages, constrained by legal restrictions, limited financial capacity, and insufficient staff training. This study redefines care farms not merely as welfare providers, but as “community resilience hubs” for rural communities' survival. This perspective distinguishes the Japanese model—driven by the urgency of depopulation—from frameworks focused solely on therapeutic outcomes or farm business viability. The study concludes that care farms act as hybrid institutions linking welfare, agriculture, economy, and culture, holding significant but unevenly realized potential to sustain rural communities as a vital defensive mechanism under demographic pressure.

1. Introduction

Since the post-war era, Japanese agriculture has struggled with structural inefficiencies, most notably farmland fragmentation that raises costs and reduces productivity [1]. Since the mid-1990s, policy reforms have promoted a shift from small family farms to larger, professionalized operations to consolidate land and improve efficiency [2]. However, the sector now faces acute demographic pressures—an aging workforce, shortage of successors, and growing farmland abandonment—leaving Japanese agriculture at a crossroads between pursuing scale and preserving rural communities [3–5].

These agricultural challenges intersect with broader social issues. Approximately 9.2% of Japan's population, or over 11.6 million people, live with disabilities [6]. Despite legal quotas, in 2024 only 46.0% of private companies achieved the mandated 2.4% employment rate, and more than half of employees with disabilities leave their jobs within a year [7, 8]. The problem is particularly severe in rural regions, where limited job opportunities and outmigration exacerbate isolation for both people with disabilities and the elderly.

In response, the concept of “*The Combination of Agriculture and Care*” (*Noufuku Renkei*) has gained momentum since 2010. This approach links farmland utilization with inclusive employment, creating

opportunities for people with disabilities while addressing labour shortages and revitalizing rural communities [9]. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) has identified it as a key strategy for balancing agricultural sustainability with social inclusion.

Comparable models in Europe, such as “care farming”, “social farming”, and “green care”, have demonstrated considerable benefits. Research shows improvements in well-being, reductions in depression and anxiety, and enhanced opportunities for participation among marginalized groups. Within health geography, the “therapeutic landscape” concept further highlights how engagement with agricultural environments can positively influence mental health and social integration [10]. However, most international studies have focused on health and welfare outcomes, leaving the broader socio-economic contributions of care farms underexplored.

In Japan, existing research has similarly emphasized therapeutic and social outcomes, while their potential contributions to rural revitalization and regional economies remain insufficiently examined [11, 12]. This gap is especially pressing in the context of depopulation, farmland abandonment, and the erosion of rural social communities. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for understanding the effectiveness of care farms but also for informing approach that support sustainable rural societies under demographic and structural pressures.

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Care farming thus emerges as a promising alternative that can generate agricultural output, diversify income streams, and promote local self-sufficiency while advancing inclusion.

This study therefore investigates how care farming initiatives contribute to rural socio-economic revitalization in Japan. Particularly, it investigates the progress and outcomes of exemplary cases designated by MAFF, drawing on qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with farm managers. Together, these objectives provide insights into the mechanisms, challenges, and effects of care farming as a strategy for regional revitalization in Japan.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design to investigate how care farming contributes to rural revitalization in Japan. Fieldwork combined site visits, semi-structured interviews, and direct observation, with data analyzed using grounded theory coding in NVivo.

2.1. Case and Participant Selection

Cases were identified through a multi-stage procedure drawing on official records from the MAFF and regional agricultural bureaus. Cases were selected based on the following criteria: (1) formal registration with MAFF or local agricultural offices; (2) recognition through the *Noufuku Award* (noufuku.jp/award); (3) geographic diversity across Japan's eight regions; (4) capture of five major types of Japanese care farming that were categorized based on the entities involved (cooperation type, intragroup collaboration type, welfare integrate type, direct employment type and intermediate support type); (5) active participation in local care-farming networks; (6) over five years of continuous operation; and (7) ongoing collaboration with external partners such as agricultural cooperatives, welfare centers, and medical institutions.

From 156 qualifying initiatives nationwide, suitable cases were purposively selected based on geographic representativeness, organizational diversity/uniqueness, and operational sustainability. Subsequently, considering participation willingness of stakeholders and field research accessibility, 17 cases were ultimately selected (two to three per region). Through our screening process, all participants were directors or senior managers with at least five years of leadership experience, directly involved in daily operations and capable of detailing implementation processes. Every interviewee was contacted in advance and signed an informed consent form.

This purposive sampling strategy ensured that the selected cases represented "exemplary cases" capable of yielding rich, information-dense insights into effective revitalization mechanisms.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were gathered through site visits, direct observation of agricultural tasks, and semi-structured interviews

lasting 30–60 minutes. Observations focused on work environments and interactions involving people with disabilities. Interviews were guided by a standardized protocol, informed by international care farming studies [13, 14], covering initiative background, organizational achievements and challenges, client participation, external collaborations, and practices for rural communities. Additional short conversations with frontline staff were used to confirm managers' accounts.

The fieldwork team brought together expertise in qualitative methods [15], disability care, and agricultural practice. The first author conducted all interviews, with oversight by a senior researcher to ensure rigor, while a practitioner reviewed emergent themes for practical relevance. Participation was voluntary, non-remunerated, and anonymized. Summarized findings were shared with participants for validation.

2.3. Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and coded in NVivo using a grounded theory approach [16]. Analysis proceeded in three stages: open coding to identify initial concepts, focused coding to refine categories and relationships, and theoretical coding to build an interpretive framework. Coding decisions were discussed collaboratively to enhance reliability.

Thematic saturation [17, 18] was reached across three phases: preliminary coding (Cases 1–8), refinement (Cases 9–14), and confirmation (Cases 15–17). No new themes emerged after the fifteenth case, confirming sample adequacy. Implementation depth was assessed using an adapted version of Jacobs' five-tier evaluation framework [19], supplemented with stakeholder perspectives (Table 1). This allowed systematic comparison across cases, highlighting both effective practices and persistent challenges.

3. Results

This section presents an evaluation of 17 care farm cases across Japan, based on field surveys and semi-structured interviews. To assess implementation levels and the effects of care farm initiatives on rural revitalization, we conducted qualitative coding of interview data using NVivo. The thematic coding focused on "Impact on Regional Revitalization" and was organized under five subthemes: (1) Utilization of Abandoned Farmland, (2) Agricultural Experience and Education, (3) Regional Economic Revitalization, (4) Regional Communication and Coexistence, and (5) Inheritance of Traditional Culture. Each initiative was evaluated using a five-tier implementation framework, with levels defined by the presence of documentation, observed practical outcomes, and stakeholder input. In accordance with research ethics, care farm names are anonymized using acronyms (e.g., CCR, KSM). These acronyms are consistently used throughout the Results section and are associated with each case as presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Criteria for the five-tier implementation assessment.

	Documentation	Outcomes	Stakeholder Input
Tier 1: Conceptual Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot or no practice records • Only a short concept paper or proposal from the project manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No significant benefits or measurable outcomes; remains at the “idea” stage • Solely from manager interviews or conceptual notes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers briefly mentioned these elements and suggested that they were still in a conceptual or exploratory phase. • No input from other stakeholders.
Tier 2: Initial Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial practice records (e.g., pilot plans and activity logs). • Only a brief summary from the project manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor/initial benefits • The evidence includes some observational data plus manager claims 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers made only passing references to these components in interviews, indicating early attempts without substantial progression. • Limited feedback from frontline staff or beneficiaries.
Tier 3: Partial Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic (but still incomplete) practice records (e.g., partial outcome metrics and interim reports) • Clear practice logs and partial outcome data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partial records of relevant practices, with some tangible benefits realized during execution and possibly localized expansions • Evidence that the approach improves key process or outcome metrics in at least some pilot settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers briefly mentioned these elements during interviews, suggesting awareness but indicating incomplete development. • Emerging engagement of service providers or staff (e.g., informal feedback).
Tier 4: Substantial Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete and systematic records (e.g., detailed practice logs and outcome metrics), but considerable room for development still exists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported robust—but not exhaustive—evidence of success or improvement, and field observations supported some aspects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These initiatives achieved tangible benefits and results during project implementation, with project representatives providing confirmation during interviews. • Multistakeholder engagement (e.g., staff surveys and beneficiary feedback).
Tier 5: Comprehensive Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full project documentation of processes, staff responsibilities, and outcomes, including potential fidelity checklists • Institutionalized practices and comprehensive, long-term documentation (annual audits and policy integration) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong evidence of improvements or sustained, long-term benefits • Ongoing, routine record-keeping embedded in normal operations: compliance audits, outcome dashboards, policies/training manuals • Evidence that the program is stable and can adapt to shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These initiatives were characterized by clear confirmation and detailed discussion from managers during interviews. • System-wide consensus (e.g., managers, staff, beneficiaries, and external partners).

Table 2. Overview of the characteristics of the 17 exemplary cases.

Cases	Region	Interviewee and Professional Background	Years in the Career	Number of Clients (People with disabilities)	Workdays per Week and Hours per Day
AG	Hokkaido	Facility leader; mental health care	10	19	4 days; 6 hours
DW	Hokkaido	Farm owner; farmer	4	3	4-5 days; 5 hours
TU	Hokkaido	Farm owner; farmer	9	20	5 days; 6 hours
KKR	Tohoku	Farm manager; farmer	8	15	3-4 days; 7 hours
MS	Tohoku	Facility manager; social worker	11	15	5 days; 4 hours
FO	Hokuriku	Facility manager; social worker	5	25	4 days; 5 hours
TK	Hokuriku	Facility manager; social worker	7	11	4-5 days; 5 hours
KMR	Kanto	Farm manager; farmer	10	25	5 days; 5 hours
ST	Kanto	Farm manager; farmer and social worker	6	40	3-4 days; 6 hours
KSM	Tokai	Farm owner; farmer	8	60	2-3 days; 6 hours
MM	Tokai	Facility manager; social worker	12	90	4 days; 5 hours
SN	Kinki	Facility manager; social worker	13	32	5 days; 6 hours
AH	Kinki	Facility leader; social worker and Teacher of special needs school	20	122	3-4 days; 6 hours
SF	Chugoku& Shikoku	Farm manager; farmer	9	20	4-5 days; 8 hours
TY	Chugoku& Shikoku	Facility leader; social worker	6	37	5 days; 6 hours
CCR	Kyushu	Farm owner; farmer	9	26	5 days; 6 hours
DJM	Kyushu	Facility leader; social worker	20	90	4-5 days; 7 hours

3.1. Utilization of Abandoned Farmland

One of the most tangible regional impacts of care farms lies in their capacity to reclaim and revitalize abandoned or underutilized farmland, a growing concern in Japan's aging and depopulated rural regions. Among the 17 cases analyzed, only two cases (KKR and ST) reached partial implementation in "Utilization of Abandoned Farmland." These farms successfully transformed idle plots into productive and socially meaningful spaces through creative land use and community engagement strategies.

In the case of KKR, a shared-use model was developed in collaboration with elderly landowners, allowing care farm staff and users to reactivate previously abandoned plots. This approach not only restored farmland but also facilitated intergenerational relationships within the local community.

We were able to bring abandoned fields back into use by partnering with elderly farmers who could no longer manage them alone. It gave new life not only to the land, but also to our relationships with people in the area.

(Farm manager of KKR, male)

SF similarly repurposed abandoned farmland by combining agricultural planting with community-focused spatial design. Abandoned farmland repurposed not only for agricultural production but also as a venue for inclusive community activities.

We planted olive trees on the abandoned farmland we're leasing, and reused scrap materials provided by a local supplier to create a space for activities and relaxation. This helped us restore the neglected land, and now we host barbecues and community gatherings there that bring local people together.

(Farm manager of ST, male)

These examples show how farmland restoration can go beyond agricultural productivity to support regional interaction and placemaking. Seven additional cases were assessed at the initial implementation level, showing some preparatory efforts such as land surveys or coordination with local governments. The remaining eight cases remained at the conceptual stage, where farmland use was acknowledged as a goal but had not yet been operationalized.

Despite these promising examples, the findings suggest that the majority of care farms face significant operational and structural barriers to effective land reclamation. Common obstacles include shortages of labor and equipment, limited financial capacity, and the lack of appropriately trained staff to supervise fieldwork by users with disabilities. In addition, legal and institutional constraints pose major challenges. Under Japan's Agricultural Land Act, only certified farmers or agricultural entities are permitted to purchase or lease farmland, making it difficult for new entrants [20]—including care farms operated by welfare organizations—to access land through conventional channels. As farming supporter of AH explained:

There are a lot of restrictions when it comes to acquiring or using farmland. Unlike regular land transactions, the Agricultural Land Act requires that you be a registered farmer to obtain land. That makes it really

hard for someone trying to start a new agricultural project.

(Farming supporter of AH, male)

Further complications arise when farmland has not been properly inherited or registered. In cases of unclear inheritance, the ownership of the land remains legally ambiguous, making it virtually unusable.

When inheritance registration hasn't been completed, the owner of the land is unclear, and we can't proceed with using it—even if the land is completely abandoned.

(Farming supporter of AH, male)

These regulatory and administrative barriers create a complex legal environment that hinders timely and flexible use of farmland. They also disproportionately affect small-scale or non-traditional agricultural actors, such as care farms, which may lack the legal or institutional resources to navigate land acquisition processes.

3.2. Agricultural Experience and Food Education

Care farms contribute to regional revitalization by providing platforms for "Agricultural Experience and Food Education", particularly in areas where intergenerational interaction and agricultural knowledge transmission are in decline. Among the 17 cases analyzed, eight demonstrated implementation in this area, with DW, ST, and SN reaching substantial implementation levels.

At ST, a long-standing partnership with local elementary school has evolved into a comprehensive experiential learning program.

We grow rice together with local elementary school students and hold a harvest festival. Instead of using a combine, the children harvest by hand with sickles, bundle the rice, dry it, and then thresh it. Through this process—from the ears of rice to the final product—they learn how agriculture really works. At the end, we all make rice balls together from what they harvested.

(Farm manager of ST, male)

In this initiative, ST also supports mechanized farming (e.g., tractor operations, onion harvesting) and collaborates with school dietitians. Produce grown on the school's educational field is incorporated into school lunches, directly linking farm-based activities with children's everyday life and nutrition. These efforts contribute not only to food education and hands-on agricultural learning but also to school-community integration and local cultural continuity.

In contrast, DW and SN have focused on higher education partnerships that connect university students with care farming activities as a form of both practical training and community contribution. These collaborations not only provide hands-on agricultural experience for students but also foster a new generation of agri-welfare practitioners and engaged citizens.

DW participates in a multi-stakeholder regional consortium that includes local university, vocational schools, high schools, government and corporations. Through this network, the farm hosts university interns and contributes to a five-year regional human resource development program.

Similarly, SN collaborates with students from local universities, offering them rare hands-on experiences like tea harvesting. These visits also include career exchange events where university students speak with local children about life choices and occupational possibilities.

Local university students volunteer with us to experience tea harvesting—something they rarely get to do. We also hold regular exchange sessions where they talk with children about different careers and life paths.

(Facility manager of SN, male)

These university partnerships highlight the potential of care farms to function as learning platforms that extend beyond disability support, acting instead as sites for regional knowledge circulation and civic participation. The dual benefit—providing students with grounded experience while enhancing the care farm’s visibility and legitimacy in the community—reinforces the farm’s embeddedness in the region.

In contrast, five other cases showed partial or initial implementation, while the remaining nine were still at the conceptual stage, lacking the capacity, networks, or pedagogical design needed for sustained educational collaboration.

Overall, the ST, DW, and SN cases demonstrate that when care farms are strategically linked with schools and universities, they can promote not only agricultural learning and inclusion, but also long-term regional revitalization through education-driven social infrastructure.

3.3. Regional Economic Revitalization

Care farms are increasingly recognized not only as welfare service providers but also as economic factors that contribute to regional revitalization through branding, value-added production, employment generation, and place-based industry development. Among the 17 cases analyzed, eight showed implementation progress in “Regional Economic Revitalization”, with AG, AH and TY reaching substantial implementation levels.

AG emphasized the strategic use of branding and national tax incentive schemes, such as Hometown Tax Donation Program (Furusato Nozei), to drive regional consumption and cohesion [21].

By increasing our brand value and using our products as hometown tax return gifts and local specialties, we can help revitalize the local economy and attract tourists. We hope this will strengthen the cohesion of the local community and contribute to the region’s overall development.

(Facility leader of AG, male)

AH also revitalized the local economy by operating multi-functional facilities, including a community restaurant and local produce market. These venues serve not only as commercial hubs, but also as social gathering places, effectively blurring the boundaries between consumption, community building, and care. Their role in tourist attraction and local branding has helped increase foot traffic and diversify the regional economy.

TY has established robust partnerships with JA (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives) and local enterprises, enabling

a reciprocal flow of goods, services, and support. The farm supplies produce to JA, stimulating job creation and economic circulation within the cooperative network. In return, JA supports DW through technical guidance and productivity-enhancing resources.

By supplying agricultural products to JA, we help create employment opportunities and generate local economic activity. At the same time, we receive support from JA, which helps us improve productivity and skills. Through this kind of collaboration, the entire region grows—we support each other both economically and socially.

(Facility leader of TY, male)

This mutually reinforcing relationship illustrates how care farms can integrate into existing agricultural and economic infrastructures, allowing for shared growth between welfare-based and mainstream sectors.

In total, five additional cases demonstrated partial or initial implementation, typically engaging in local sales activities or regional product fairs. The remaining nine cases remained at the conceptual implementation level, with limited access to sales networks, underdeveloped branding strategies, or weak institutional linkages.

Taken together, these findings reveal that care farms hold considerable, yet unevenly realized, potential to contribute to rural economic regeneration. Their success depends not only on internal capacity (production, coordination, human resources), but also on external partnerships and systemic integration—particularly with local cooperatives, tourism sectors, and public-sector revitalization schemes.

3.4. Regional Communication and Coexistence

Beyond economic and educational contributions, care farms play a growing role in fostering inclusive and interactive communities. By offering spaces for interpersonal exchange, shared agricultural work, and public events, care farms help integrate persons with disabilities into everyday community life, while revitalizing social ties among diverse local residents. Among the 17 cases analyzed, 12 cases demonstrated implementation progress in this area, with AH and CCR achieving substantial implementation.

In particular, AH addressed labor shortages during the blueberry harvest by organizing a participatory picking program that engaged families and local residents. Participants helped with the manual harvest and received compensation based on their contribution.

In this area, harvest experiences like blueberry picking are especially popular with families. Since the work is entirely manual, we never have enough labor with just our users and staff. When families or tourists join the harvest, they help us pick a large volume of blueberries. They don’t have to take everything home—they can select their favorites, and we purchase the rest at our own procurement price and pay them accordingly. After the picking, many use that money to enjoy a meal or shop at our facility’s restaurant.

(Facility leader of AH, male)

This initiative not only supports labor needs but also creates a localized economic loop, in which earnings from farming are reinvested in the community. Importantly, the model is inclusive: care facility users, local residents, and visitors work side by side, forming what AH describes as regional manpower. Such shared experiences contribute to dismantling social boundaries between people with and without disabilities.

Our staff and service users form teams and go out to support local farmers who are aging or otherwise struggling to keep up. We help with heavy work like harvesting or clearing tomato trellises. It's more than cooperation—it's paid work. We both benefit, and the relationship continues.

(Facility leader of TY, male)

TY's model illustrates how care farms can contribute to mutual interdependence in aging rural areas, not just through social bonding but through labor exchange and functional collaboration.

In addition to AH and TY, two other cases showed partial implementation, offering community events and seasonal activities. Eight cases demonstrated initial implementation, while the remaining five remained at the conceptual stage, with minimal community-facing initiatives.

These findings underscore the diverse ways care farms contribute to coexistence-oriented regional communities. Whether through shared experiences, functional collaboration, or inclusive public spaces, they help reweave the social fabric of depopulating rural areas—placing persons with disabilities not on the periphery, but at the center of community revitalization.

3.5. Inheritance of Traditional Culture

While economic inclusion and community engagement form the operational backbone of most care farms, a smaller number of initiatives also serve as stewards of regional cultural heritage. Among the 17 cases, five showed implementation: FO at a substantial level, AH partial, and three at initial stages.

FO embedded cultural preservation into its brand by developing mulberry-leaf tea, a crop historically tied to regional sericulture and local festivals.

Behind our souvenir product development is the connection to local festivals and traditional culture, which emerged in a region that once thrived through sericulture. By branding mulberry leaf tea, we're not only preserving that legacy but also creating value in our own work. For a welfare facility, it's rare to align traditional culture with product development. But doing so makes our offerings more distinctive and meaningful.

(Facility manager of FO, female)

This approach highlights a hybrid cultural-economic strategy—not simply reviving a crop but repurposing it as a symbolic and regional brand asset. In doing so, the farm enhances its visibility while reinforcing local identity, positioning care farming as a potential vehicle for both social inclusion and cultural continuity.

AH also focused on preserving architectural and ritual traditions by maintaining a traditional-style heritage home,

which serves as a venue for agricultural experiences and lifestyle education targeting children, families, and local residents.

In addition, the facility provides the stalks of Ebi-imo (a local taro variety) as a critical construction material for the roof of the Zuiki-mikoshi, a traditional portable shrine used in regional festivals.

We provide crops that are used in the local shrine's ceremonial events. It may seem small, but it ties our farming to something much larger—the continuity of tradition.

(Facility leader of AH, male)

This act goes beyond symbolic participation: it represents a functional contribution to the physical reproduction of cultural heritage, tying the farm's agricultural output to the continuation of time-honored ceremonial forms.

4. Conclusions

This study examined 17 care farm initiatives across Japan to assess their contributions to rural revitalization. Five dimensions of impact were identified: farmland utilization, agricultural education, economic integration, community communication, and cultural preservation. These results indicate that care farms serve not only as welfare providers through health interventions but also as hybrid institutions integrating agriculture, social care service and community resilience functions for rural survival and revitalization. This perspective distinguishes the Japanese model—driven by the urgency of depopulation—from frameworks focused solely on individual therapeutic outcomes or farm business viability.

In conclusion, care farming in Japan illustrates a promising yet fragile model of rural revitalization. While some initiatives demonstrate its capacity to restore land, educate new generations, stimulate local economies, foster inclusive communities, and preserve traditions, the current impact remains constrained by structural barriers. Strengthening the combination of agriculture and care holds significant potential not only for disability inclusion but also for sustaining Japan's rural regions in the face of demographic and structural challenges. Broader institutional support is therefore essential to scale up these impacts from isolated success stories to a systemic regional defense strategy.

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