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## **ANALYSIS ON SUPPORT PROGRAM WITH CONVERSION FROM VACANT HOUSES INTO COMMUNITY BASES: A CASE IN SETAGAYA WARD, TOKYO**

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### **Abstract**

*The municipal government of Setagaya Ward established a consultation program for individual owners of vacant houses in July 2013 to convert them into useful places for the community. This service aims to match with owners of vacant houses and citizen groups such as non-profit organizations and has established 22 bases for the community in 10 years. The authors found that the majority of them are used for social welfare offering places for children, disabilities, or the elderly. These facts indicate the necessity of the role of the public sector's program rather than private companies to promote the re-utilization of vacant houses into places of inclusionary use for the community.*

## **Keywords**

Utilization of Vacant Houses, Community Base, Intermediary Organization, Non-Profit Organization

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## **1. Introduction**

Vacant houses account for 13.6% of the total number of houses in Japan (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2019), and the number continues to increase. There are concerns that abandoned vacant houses may affect people's lives in terms of landscape, crime prevention, hygiene, etc. The Law on Special Measures for Vacant Houses was enacted in 2015 to address this issue. Based on the law, municipalities are empowered to deal with abandoned vacant houses. Recently, there have been movements to promote the use of vacant houses in most of the cities in Japan.

This study analyzes the Setagaya Ward's program of "Consultation Service for Utilization of Vacant Houses for Community Contribution" and experiences of the "Community Inclusive Bases" as the result of the program. The program regards vacant houses as a community resource and matches owners with registered citizen groups such as non-profit organizations. In 2013, the municipal government of Setagaya Ward established the consultation service program committed to the Setagaya Trust Community Development Foundation (hereafter referred to as "Setagaya Trust Foundation"). This foundation is an affiliated organization established by Setagaya Ward to support community development. With the support of the Setagaya Trust Foundation, 22 community bases of converted vacant houses were established during approximately 10 years from 2013 to 2023, including gathering places for parents and children and places to support people with disabilities.

There are many previous studies on the utilization of existing buildings as community bases. Komatsu et al. (2007) surveyed places for community using existing buildings operated voluntarily by local citizens and clarified the characteristics of the space and its operation. Yamamoto et al. (2012) analyzed the details of renovation and financing methods for child-care support facilities utilizing existing buildings. Umemoto et al. (2020) investigated a café for caregivers that utilized a vacant house and pointed out the importance of permanent bases. Nakamura et al. (2019) revealed the difficulty of securing vacant houses that can be utilized for

community activities and mentioned the need for a system to consolidate and provide information on vacant houses.

Studies of the Setagaya Ward's program for utilization of vacant houses are few. Oida et al. (2018) pointed out the importance of an intermediary organization that stands between owners and NPOs in terms of the continuity of community bases. Mishina and Fujiga (2021) noted that the effectiveness of the program as a solution to the vacant house problem is limited because the bases are not located in areas with many vacant houses. Both studies were limited in the number of bases surveyed and did not adequately clarify the reality of the operation of this program. The program is unique in being operated by an intermediary organization affiliated with Setagaya Ward. However, the background and significance of the program's operation by an intermediary organization have not been clarified.

The purpose of this study is to examine the role and effects of the program and its challenges through an analysis of the program and all 22 established community bases. The experiences of this municipal program, which started preceding the national law, have many useful suggestions for the future of vacant house utilization in urban areas as a public policy for community development.

The background of the research is the "community-based symbiotic society" that is being promoted as a national policy in Japan according to the revised Social Welfare Law in 2018 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2021). The goal is to create a society where everyone is not isolated and has a sense of fulfillment in life by connecting and supporting each other among all local citizens.

The theoretical background is "Social Quality", which has spread mainly in Europe. This theory is a challenge to the idea that only economic growth can improve the quality of life of individuals and society. In the social quality model, the opportunities that individuals should have are organized into four quadrants: socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment (International Association on Social Quality, 2020). We consider that the practice of citizens proactively utilizing vacant houses as community bases contributes to securing the four opportunities.

## **2. Material and Method**

The survey covered the Setagaya Ward's community support program of "Consultation Service for Utilization of Vacant Houses for Community Contribution" and all 22 community bases established through this program (as of May 2023). The survey was conducted using the Setagaya Trust Foundation's archives and other records. Of the 22 bases, two were closed at the time of this survey.

For citizens to engage in mutually supportive activities in a community, a "gathering place" is necessary. We analyzed this place through case studies of vacant houses voluntarily provided by citizens. Specifically, we clarified the requirements for the matching of place providers and utilizers by categorizing the types of buildings and activities of community bases.

### **3. Survey and Analysis**

#### **3.1. Analysis of the Public Administrative Program**

##### **3.1.1. Background of the Municipal Program Installation**

In 2013, the municipal government of Setagaya Ward received a recommendation from the Setagaya Ward Housing Committee to realize the utilization of vacant houses as a policy administration. Setagaya Ward officials organized a study group and appointed the Setagaya Trust Foundation which had experience supporting civic activities and housing utilization as a member of the committee. The study group advised that the use of supported houses should be limited for public benefits such as community revitalization or welfare of the local community. The objective should be not to reduce the number of vacant houses but to increase the number of bases that contribute to the community.

The municipal government of Setagaya Ward has set up a program whereby Setagaya Trust Foundation serves a role as the matching body with vacant house owners and citizen groups such as NPOs. It also prepares a grant of up to 2 million yen for each fiscal year for initial maintenance costs such as renovation of the houses.

##### **3.1.2. Buildings and Citizen Groups Requirements**

This program targets "vacant houses" in detached houses, "vacant apartment units" in apartment buildings, and "vacant rooms" in detached houses and apartment buildings. The building must conform to the laws and regulations in effect at the time of construction and meet

current earthquake resistance standards. If the building does not meet the technical requirements, it must be made compliant through renovation work before the start of utilization.

The requirements for citizen groups are that they must contribute to the community in some way and that they must not distribute the profits generated by their activities to their members. This program does not target for-profit organizations.

### **3.1.3. System Workflow**

If an owner requests to use the program, the Setagaya Trust Foundation staff and the registered architect will check the building. Upon receiving the results of the architect's verification, the municipal government will sort out the conditions of the building. The Foundation will inform owners of the government's decision, and if the owner wishes to use the matching program with citizen groups, an observation tour will be organized. Then, owners and related groups will hold discussions, and if the matching is done, a lease agreement will be signed.

Matching bases are divided into the following three categories (A) through (C).

- (A) Bases in which grants were used
- (B) Bases in which grants were not used
- (C) Bases where the owner utilizes

After the matching agreement is done, cases that require renovation of the building may apply for the grant. Cases applying for the grant are classified as (A), those not using the grant are classified as (B), and cases where the owner wishes to operate the building by themselves without citizen groups are classified as (C).

## **3.2. Analysis of the Community Bases**

### **3.2.1. Classification of buildings for the community bases**

The bases are categorized by building type in Table 1. Vacant rooms accounted for the largest number of cases (12). Among these, there is a case of a two-family house with a shared entrance that became vacant due to the passing of the parent family.

**Table 1:** Classification of Buildings for Bases

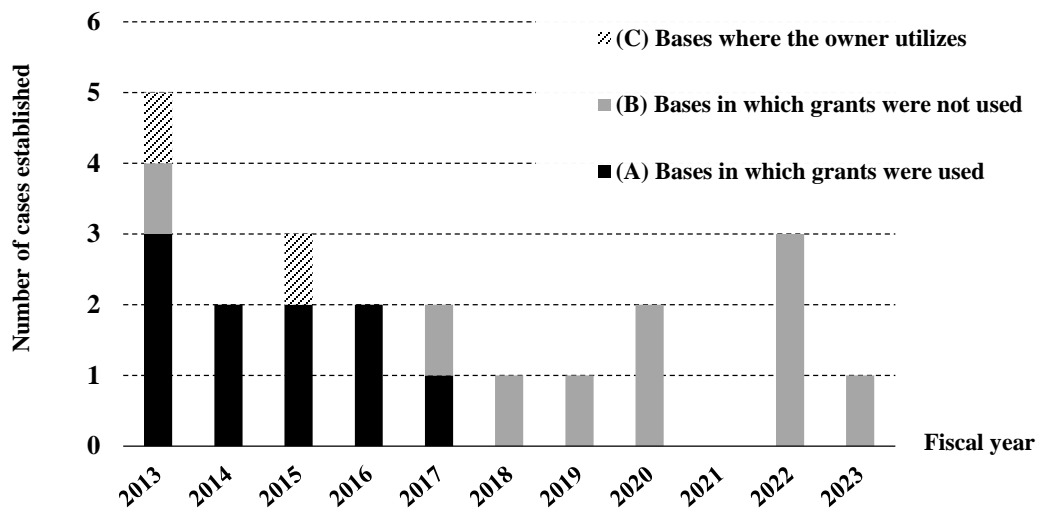
Classification of Buildings	Number
Vacant Houses	5
Vacant Apartment Units	5
Vacant Rooms	12
Total Number	22

(Source: Self)

### 3.2.2. Number of Bases Established by Fiscal Year

Figure 1 shows the number of established community bases that are categorized (A), (B), and (C) by fiscal year. While (A) accounts for up to FY 2017, only (B) can be identified after that time. The reason why grants have not been used in recent years is because the buildings meet the requirements or have been renovated at their own expense.

**Figure 1:** Number of Bases by Fiscal Year



(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

### 3.2.3. Type of Activity for the Community Bases

The community bases that converted vacant houses were categorized by their main activities and organized in Table 2. The most common type is "Welfare of children and parents". 6 bases for infants and their parents have been created by utilizing houses. The next two most common types are "Welfare of the disabled" and "Interaction with neighborhood". Many of them serve the role of contributing to the community's welfare.

**Table 2:** *Type of Activity for Bases*

<b>Type of Activity</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Welfare of children and parents (8)	Place for infants and parents (6) Others (2)
Welfare of the disabled (4)	Place for children with developmental disabilities (3) Place for persons with mental disabilities (1)
Interaction with neighborhood (4)	Community café (1) Others (3)
Welfare of elderly (1)	Day care (1)
Others (5)	Grief care (1) Children's self-reliance support facility (1) Shelter for mothers (1) Place for people who have experienced social withdrawal (1) Others (1)
Total Number	22

(Source: Self)

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1. Requirements for Utilization of Vacant Houses and Invaluable Role of Intermediary Organizations**

Through this survey, it was revealed that the most common type is the conversion of vacant rooms, whereas many of them are used as welfare places for children or disabled people. This kind of matching service, which cannot be profitable, is hardly able to be offered by usual private companies. Private real estate can usually handle vacant houses and apartment units, but not vacant rooms. Also, if citizen groups want to turn a vacant house into an open welfare place for the community, it would be difficult for a private company to do so. These facts indicate the necessity of public policy and programs by public sectors.

The intermediary organization in charge of this program is an organization that supports community activities, and they have more information and networks with citizen groups than the public sector. They are suitable for promoting the community welfare utilization of vacant houses because of their understanding and expertise in community activities, which are distinct from economic activities.

#### **4.2. Variety of Housing Utilization**

In terms of activity type, focusing on "others", there is a wide range of activities such as grief care and shelters for mothers. This variety indicates the possibility of utilizing houses and the social participation of a diverse population.

#### **4.3. Possibility of Preventing Vacant Houses by Utilizing Vacant Rooms**

The utilization of vacant rooms may have the effect of preventing the occurrence of vacant houses. If even a single room is utilized in a way that contributes to the community, it may continue to be utilized without becoming a vacant house even after the residents are gone. As Japan's population continues to decline and age, and the number of vacant houses increases, measures to prevent the occurrence of vacant houses are needed.

### **5. Conclusion**

Through this system, which matches vacant house owners with NPOs, a wide range of welfare bases have been created for children, the disabled, and the elderly. The study suggested the importance of the system operated by an intermediary organization that supports community activities by citizens. It was also revealed that vacant rooms, rather than vacant houses, are most frequently utilized. This shows that even a single room can become a base that contributes to the community's welfare.

90% of the area of Setagaya Ward is zoned residential (Setagaya Ward, 2023). Therefore, it is difficult to utilize entire vacant houses for purposes other than housing in terms of use restrictions. In urban areas, we should focus not only on vacant houses but also on surplus space within buildings. The increase in the community bases is related to the improvement of social quality. Adding functions that support people's daily lives to surplus space may help create a livable city.

Further research is needed to determine whether the use of vacant rooms can prevent the occurrence of vacant houses.



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