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Regional Science for Small Islands: Construction of a New Approach to Island Studies

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Introduction

Geographically dispersed island nations and regions have often been positioned along the margins of globalization, passively subjected to global changes and criteria set by larger countries of the developed world. At present, however, the criticality of geopolitics in island countries and regions has grown both at home and abroad, in light of concerns that include international security as well as management of maritime traffic and marine resources.

From a different angle, local communities play an important role within politically and economically vulnerable small islands. For small islands continually faced with insufficient manpower directly brought about by limitations in population size, social ties binding individuals within society becomes key, as does close cooperation and the need to mobilize each member within the community to perform a certain range of roles and responsibilities. In order to further the progression of modern society, it is essential to integrate advancements in knowledge gleaned from science and technology, as well as studies in socio-economic systems, with the wisdom and traditions that have been preserved for generations within island communities, for the purpose of creating a sustainable model for island societies that is highly compatible with their natural and social environments. The formation of functional societies imbued with the ability to conduct effective decision-making autonomously is necessary for island countries/territories to maintain their independence and sovereignty from larger and more developed nations while at the same time ensuring a trajectory of growth and advancement most suited to their inherent characteristics. Furthermore, there has been a gradual shift in the general sentiment from an emphasis on mass production and consumption, a by-product of modern industrialization, to an increasing awareness of the need to respect the diversity and uniqueness of nature and traditional cultures, a movement of thought that has presented the international community with the opportunity to reevaluate the intrinsic value and *raison d'être* of small islands.

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In order for island regions to successfully negotiate the change to becoming an autonomous entity within the myriad of transformations characteristic of modern global society, it is vital to not only address the disadvantages small islands face vis-à-vis the mainland and larger countries, but also to simultaneously harness their comparative advantages. Despite the above, many islands continue to face protracted insufficient manpower as well as restricted access to professional expertise and a lack of adequate know-how in data collection and analysis crucial to tackle the issues at hand. The Research Institute for Islands and Sustainability (RIIS) of the University of the Ryukyus, strategically located in the small-island territory of Okinawa, has continued to pledge its efforts in leading research in island studies across a diverse range of fields towards the overall objective of resolving problems and issues faced by islands while also helping them to materialize a future of autonomous and sustainable development.

The concept of an “autonomous model of island society” advanced in research undertaken by RIIS refers to the need for island regions to gain an awareness of their intrinsic characteristics and problems while at the same time maintaining their capacity to self-govern against the backdrop of social and economic influence from the mainland and larger nations. By utilizing functions of island networks to boost mutual problem sharing and cooperation, island regions can work towards a model of a society capable of self-generation, one facilitated and powered by autonomous decision making.

It is the ultimate goal of “regional science for small islands” to recognize the complexities of island societies as a closely interwoven amalgamation of composite factors (people, nature, culture, economy, politics, etc.) while scientifically evaluating specific strategies that will successfully allow island regions to overcome their disadvantages and develop their strengths for the purpose of building an autonomous model of society, and at the same time, arriving at an effective prescription for the above to be realized through respect for the agency of island regions and their people.

Why Must Island Regions Engage in Science?

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which came into effect in 1994, awarded small-island countries and territories of the world with expansive areas of exclusive economic zones, effectively bestowing upon them the responsibility of fulfilling a crucial role in a new form of maritime security and the peaceful management of marine resources (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2018b). This development is notable because the existence of small-island nations and territories now held significance to other members of the international community.¹⁾

The Pacific Islands Leaders’ Meeting (PALM), a summit held in Japan once every three years, sees participation not only from island nations but also national representatives from the developed world, including the United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand, who convene to collectively release joint statements on issues faced by Pacific islands, such as economic development, environmental conservation, politics, and

international security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018a). The PALM is clear evidence of how ensuring peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region is inextricably linked to the pressing need to promote development of remote island regions within Japan as well as the forging and maintaining of close bilateral relationships between Japan and the Pacific Islands, a relationship that has existed historically, politically, and economically. Within the context of Japan, the Remote Islands Development Act, a set of legislative measures aimed at helping remote island regions overcome disadvantages and barriers to development, has been pivotal in the protection and advancement of national interests in areas such as defense of maritime borders and exclusive economic waters as well as efficient use of marine resources and conservation of culture and the environment²⁾ (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2018).

In order to counter the weakening of local societies triggered by the effects of an aging populace and depopulation, reactive efforts have been initiated in the form of regional revival and revitalization in order to boost autonomous development of island communities and foster stability in the livelihoods of their residents. Small islands both inside and outside of Japan have also voiced the need for leaders equipped with high levels of expertise and know-how for problem solving who are also capable of forming constructive relationships with surrounding regions. In revisions for the Remote Islands Development Act that came into effect on April 1, 2013, a new section of legislation (Article 15, “Fundamental Items for the Acquisition and Development of Skilled Talent for Contribution to the Revitalization of Remote Islands”) was newly incorporated into the basic policies of the Act, highlighting the imperative that the acquisition and development of human resources must be undertaken as a matter of urgency. Additional revisions in the form of laws approving fiscal subsidies to be made available to regional revitalization projects also underscored the emphasis placed upon island regions by the central government.

Swift transformations of the social and economic conditions of island nations and regions, including Okinawa, have meant that existing theoretical and academic frameworks are no longer adequate in serving as accurate tools for the examination of current issues and situations faced by island regions. This has been further exacerbated by the multifarious characteristic of island societies, which oftentimes tend to be small and composed of closely interlinked societal factors. The complexities involved in observing island societies have given rise to a need for a new field of study, one that is able to sufficiently analyze local communities in small islands through the utilization of an integrated and multilateral structure of thought and theory. Japan has received numerous requests, particularly from the island territories of the Pacific, to render international assistance in the form of monetary funding, engineering, and the transfer of technical know-how as well as the provision of scientific expertise for the purpose of tackling societal issues that include planned development of talent and human resources. The need for Japan to respond to such expectations is crucial, as the amalgamation of ties with the Pacific region is vital to assure the overall stability and security of the Asia-Pacific region.

Thus, the deep significance behind the move to establish the field of regional science for small islands in the island territory of Okinawa becomes apparent. As an island region, Okinawa is appositely positioned as a mutual stakeholder to contribute to the realm of academic research by pursuing with empathy the search for solutions to problems uniquely faced by island communities.

The process for island regions to nurture suitable talent is indispensable for regional science for small islands to be fully systematized as a new field of academic study. While existing approaches in island studies have been central in accumulating case studies related to various island communities and their issues, the process to have island studies recognized and established as an independent field of academic research has been impeded because such data has not been informed by a consciousness of the concept of “islandness,” nor has it been sufficiently subjected to collective examination through a common and integrated system of academic rigor. This has made it difficult for universities and academic institutions to establish frameworks of learning and curricula to impart teachings on island regions, which eventually translates into the inability to consistently and systematically train individuals to undertake responsibilities in leading development in island regions. The construction of an operable system for regional science for small islands will not only make possible education programs to train and nurture future researchers to serve as the foundation of human resources for the field but will also contribute eventually to the fostering of capable leaders in mobilizing moves for regional revitalization and problem resolution.

Crucial Themes in Regional Science for Small Islands

Okinawa is a prefecture comprised solely of small, dispersed islands. Given its geographical traits and historical background, Okinawa is richly cosmopolitan in comparison to other parts of Japan. Traditionally, Okinawa has maintained intimate ties with islands in the Asia-Pacific region throughout its history, while its uniquely subtropical climate has given birth to an ecosphere of abundantly diverse natural environments and living organisms, which serve as a source of strong interest for researchers and tourists alike. Given the advantages presented by these conditions, Okinawa, in its capacity as a mutual stakeholder sharing common perspectives, is poised to attract researchers from in and outside of Japan in advancing research on island regions. Within the research projects undertaken by RIIS, efforts aimed at establishing a framework for regional science for small islands have led to the adoption of four pivotal themes deemed necessary for the autonomous and sustainable development of island nations and regions. These themes shall be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs, using the island territory of Okinawa as an example.

The first theme is foreign relations and diplomacy. Islands, being surrounded completely by water, are often regarded as entities plagued by physical and geographical isolation. Conversely, islands have historically bridged barriers in distance by crossing

the seas to form ties with other islands and landside territories. Relationships forged in this manner are lasting and formative, with islanders traveling away from familiar shores to connect with the world beyond while simultaneously ensuring the operability of their own communities. In the modern context, however, island nations and territories have had to respond to calls from the international community to participate in the world order by assuming responsibilities concerning international security and management of marine resources. At the same time, they must face issues of autonomy in economic relations that arise from the receipt of economic assistance and technological expertise as well as create policies for regional promotion and development.

In the case of Okinawa, the island territory traces back to its beginnings as a maritime kingdom, flourishing in trade across a vast expanse of ocean spanning Japan and Southeast Asia. In modern times, Okinawa has built on its history to establish close ties with islands in the Asia-Pacific region, progressing further to form a vast network based on its past as a center of emigration to Hawai'i and various parts of Central and Latin America. As a U.S.-administrated territory after the end of WWII and within the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance, Okinawa has been placed in a position where it is directly exposed to repercussions from changes in international politics and affairs. These are some of the most unique pluralistic characteristics of Okinawa, which have been formed as a result of its geographical traits as an island archipelago.

The second crucial theme in regional science for small islands is economic systems. Islands often suffer setbacks in developing their economies due to their limited land size and remoteness from the mainland. Scant land area makes them unsuitable for the establishment of heavy industries and renders them unviable options as locations for large-scale manufacturing and production. Positioned away from large cities and left without sizeable consumer markets, island economies are characterized by lower levels of productivity in comparison to those on the mainland and in developed nations. Okinawa has been the subject of special legislation known as the Act on Special Measures for the Promotion and Development of Okinawa, under which the Basic Plan for the 21st Century Vision of Okinawa has been established (Okinawa Prefectural Office, 2017). Specifically, an independent section titled Challenges Unique to Okinawa that Must Be Overcome highlights the following four issues: resolving base challenges and use of former military bases, overcoming the disadvantageous conditions of outlying islands and contribution to national interests, construction of transit and transportation networks linking the oceanic islands of Okinawa, and measures to boost regional autonomy. In addition, island regions also require countermeasures to overcome shortcomings in economic infrastructure such as energy and water supply. Such limitations may be considered deficiencies within general concepts regarding economic development, namely economies of scale. It thus becomes necessary to question if islands can successfully implement models for "island-based economies," where autonomous and sustainable economic development may be achieved without reliance on expansionist models of economic progress. The key to unlocking the true abundance of island regions through the conception of strategies for

economic robustness thus lies squarely on the shoulders of academic study and research.

The third theme vital in the study of regional science for small islands is diversity. Islands, at once limited in land area, geographically remote, and surrounded by vast expanses of ocean, possess several unique societal features that may be traced to their distinctive geographical properties. Although commonly termed and collectively referred to as “islands,” the world’s vast collection of islands is varied and distinct, each possessing its own special individuality and characteristics. Okinawa is composed of about 300 islands, 49 of which are inhabited, that are dispersed over a distance of approximately 1,000 km from east to west and 400 km north to south (Okinawa Prefectural Office, 2018). This wide geographical distribution has led to a myriad of varied characteristics from island to island, arising from differences in natural and topographical environments, cultures, and languages, as well as in industry types and economic foundations, making Okinawa an engaging case study through which a diverse range of frameworks for economic activity, operating under limitations such as constricted land size and geographical remoteness, may be observed. Okinawa is at once home to highly urbanized regions, such as the central and southern parts of the main island of Okinawa, as well as outlying islands lacking in modern conveniences, whose residents live in harmony with their natural environments. Such variations in social environments are readily observable in Okinawa because of the large number of islands located within its boundaries. In addition, Okinawa’s subtropical climate and properties as a coral island have given rise to distinct ecosystems and topography. Its history as the independent Ryukyu Kingdom has shaped a culture gleaned from Japanese and Chinese influences, providing Okinawa with an important resource for tourism along with the allure of its natural environment, the uniqueness of which has continued to draw the interest of countless people.

The final theme necessary in regional science for small islands is community. Many small islands and island regions are politically and economically weak, with limitations in the capacities of their governments and organizations. Cases of inefficient implementation of top-down regional policies are not uncommon, thereby requiring replacement with bottom-up, community-based schemes. This approach calls for the mobilization of the collective efforts of local communities and the contributions of individual residents. While it is imperative for groundwork to be undertaken in the development of human talent and consequentially in education for the people in order to effectively utilize the potential of island residents, island regions with limited populations must cope by utilizing human resources drawing from diverse backgrounds.

For example, one viable approach may be the reevaluation of the social roles of women. Amidst shared concerns among islands located both in and outside of Japan over rightful management and use of marine resources, the main stakeholders in commercial fishery have traditionally been men, leading to the consciousness that only males may join the industry and engage in fishery work. However, women have continued to play an indispensable role in the processing and sale of the marine catch, in addition to being predominant in the production of dietary cultures and habits centered on marine products.

By rethinking these social responsibilities of women, island regions will be able to tap into more diverse sources of productive labor. Social capital vital for cooperation and collaboration within local communities is likely to be more effectively mobilized in the communities of small islands as compared to urbanized regions and cities. In the case of Okinawa, where the resident populaces in Naha and surrounding areas have been characterized by large population inflows, traditional communal rituals have found preservation in outlying regions and islands, with social networks such as local cooperatives and gentile associations being continued from one generation to another. Practice-based studies that examine the application and potential of the concept of *community*, an advantage once regarded to be the negative representation of the geographical narrowness and vulnerability of islands, thus forms an essential harness in academic research that is aimed at contributing positively to island regions and their societies.

The onus of refraining from conceptualizing regional science for small islands along the theoretical frameworks of existing fields of academic study lies in placing an emphasis on the fundamental principle of applying a multilateral and scholarly approach to a single, specific regional issue. For instance, there is anticipation for researchers in the fields of international relations, political science, and history to examine how islands have been positioned within external relationships vis-à-vis non-island entities through a comprehensive viewpoint capable of transcending time and distance (geographical regions). Research into economic systems may be able to encourage further debate on social issues related to the succession and maintenance of local culture and elucidate specific measures to ensure cultural inheritance by attempting a collaboration between researchers in economics, finance, and statistics as well as with scholars engaged in the fields of anthropology and ethnology. Diversity-based research, with its emphasis on examining themes centered on social diversity by focusing on gender studies along with highlighting the diversity of languages and culture, is expected to be the subject of growing anticipation in highlighting the inherent multiplicities in island regions that arise as a result of their islandness. Community research is tasked at once with analyzing the ways in which regional issues have taken form within local communities while investigating how island situations are connected to residents. The field is also required to propose and test potential approaches to problem resolutions that can be employed and applied directly by the communities in question. Consequently, the fundamental purpose of community research is to corroborate its approach with academically based evidence and methodology.

Centering the above requirements within the confines of existing academic disciplines results in the possibility of a loss of universality and a danger of reducing findings in island studies and on island regions to mere case studies. However, such drawbacks can be avoided by applying perspectives of compositeness and multilateralism to presently available frameworks, which necessitates cross-examination and dialogue between different fields of study, although the processes of communication may be hampered by differences in the academic language and technical keywords used in each field. In consideration of the multifarious and complex nature of issues faced by island communities,

overcoming these difficulties is not only essential but also important on the path to designing a new academic approach dedicated to the study of island regions.

Frameworks for Regional Science for Small Islands

For the new approach of regional science for small islands to be systematized within the framework of island studies, issues faced by island communities should be examined through a methodology based on three different *sciences* that deliver emphasis on active feedback between theory and practice. The three sciences are: normative science (for theoretical examination into ideal situations for island regions), empirical science (analysis of current situations in island regions), and practical science (elucidation of effective solutions to issues faced by island regions). By encouraging active feedback amongst the three sciences, regional science for small islands aims to introduce an effective prescription for island regions to actualize efforts towards autonomous and sustainable development. As a founding principle of theoretical research on island communities, normative science will function to stimulate logical reasoning on the ideal ways in which such development should be undertaken. Empirical science, on the other hand, focuses on examining case studies and understanding present conditions in island communities through field research and data analysis. In doing so, the empirical approach accords objectivity and key reference indicators to research outcomes. Lastly, practical science, through working directly with local communities in putting into action strategies for problem resolution generated by normative and empirical-based research, is key in elucidating subsequent efficacy and possible areas for improvement and transmitting such information to the normative and empirical sciences. It is through facilitation of active reciprocal exchange between the three sciences, exchange that is established upon sound theoretical principles and objective data analysis, that regional science for small islands can propose more effective and pragmatic approaches to problem resolution and contribute academically to overall development of island regions.

Okinawa, with its status as a fellow island territory, is best suited to function as the impetus for promoting advancement in island studies. In addition to its dominant feature as a prefecture entirely made up of numerous small islands, Okinawa's islands are at once individually different while sharing mutual commonalities, which serves as the background for the extensive breadth and diversity of issues it possesses as an island region. Against pervasive attitudes within the realm of island sciences that tend to render the relative existence of islands as being "marginal" and "remote," Okinawa is best positioned to exercise its prominence as a mutual stakeholder in island-based issues to provide an independent and empirical approach to examining regional issues. Its unique position as an "insider" also accords Okinawa with the ability to engage empathetically in the process of tackling regional issues with other island communities. Through the construction of a regional science for a small-island community based on mutual understanding and empathy, the discipline will be able to expand and develop as an academic field

equipped both theoretically and practically to contribute actively to the autonomous and sustainable development of island regions in and outside of Japan.

Okinawa and Its Role in Promoting Regional Science for Small Islands

Island regions, including Okinawa, have historically been relegated to a position of relative disadvantage by the mainland, one dominated by characteristics such as isolation, remoteness, and narrowness. In other instances, islands have also been portrayed as geographical frontiers that are territorially marginal in relation to the mainland and larger nations. Within the present-day world order, however, islands have come to be regarded as vital stakeholders in advancing national interests, and their traditions, cultural practices, and pristine natural environments have earned commendation from the rest of the world. Their isolation has become the very reason for the preservation of their cultural and natural resources and their status as frontier territory has become the impetus for attracting travelers seeking the extraordinariness of island life. There is thus growing possibility for island regions to transform what were once considered detriments into benefits for growth and development.

Island regions are now poised at the frontlines of global society, embracing roles that extend beyond their former status as frontier sites in relation to other geographical regions and undertaking responsibilities on global issues such as the conservation of eco-diversity and marine resources as well as climate change. As island regions located both domestically and internationally become increasingly important to the rest of the world community, the realization of stable and sustainable development against swift global transformations requires island regions to ensure continuous subjectivity and autonomy of decision making so as to withstand cooptation by the ways of thinking and dominant ideals of larger nations and the mainland/central government. Given the rapid pace at which island situations change and transmute, existing reserves of case studies prove insufficient in powering efforts for the resolution of regional issues. This is further exacerbated by the complex interconnectedness of factors that shape island communities, a consequence of the limitations in the land area of island regions. In response, island regions should move beyond prevailing perspectives propagated by the mainland and larger nations, focusing instead on an independent, island-based approach to tackling regional issues. In proposing a paradigm shift from “frontier to center” or “backward to frontline,” there is a necessity to establish regional science for small islands as a new academic science, one that is imbued with both theoretical and practical approaches to problem evaluation and resolution.

Prevailing attitudes in island studies assume that island regions possess a certain set of universal characteristics (isolation, remoteness, narrowness, and vulnerability) which, when considered from viewpoints held by the mainland and larger nations, are regarded as relative weaknesses. This perspective has also informed the process of empirical analysis and prospect forecasts undertaken within the frameworks for research on island

regions. In contrast, RIIS is dedicated to advancing research on island regions based on concepts of cosmopolitanism, diversity, and uniqueness, advantages that arise inherently as a result of the identifying features of islands, towards the overall objective of exploring possibilities for their self-management and sustainable development. Okinawa, which encompasses clear advantages as an island territory, serves as an excellent field for researchers to advance exploration into the realm of regional science for small islands.

Okinawa's cosmopolitanism draws from its history as a maritime kingdom, flourishing in trade with Japan and Southeast Asia, which provides the backdrop to its lasting ties with islands in the Asia-Pacific region as well as more recent developments in the form of Okinawa's global network of emigrants, particularly those from Hawai'i and South America. Moreover, Okinawa's vulnerability to direct repercussions in changes to the world order is highlighted when considering its past as a territory administered by the U.S. military as well as its relevance within the U.S.-Japan Security Alliance. These intrinsically international qualities of Okinawa are traits that have arisen directly as a result of its status as an island region. Geographically, Okinawa is strategically located as a connecting point between Asia and Oceania; within a radius of 1,500 km, approximately the distance between Okinawa and Tokyo, lie key cities such as Beijing, Hong Kong, and Manila. Within a distance of 2,500 km, the distance from Okinawa to Hokkaido, are the cities of Hanoi, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Palau (Okinawa Prefectural Office, 2018).

Okinawa's most representative feature is its diversity. Its geographical disparateness with a large number of small islands has given rise to varying degrees of individuality and uniqueness of each of its islands, with a plenitude of differences in their natural environments, languages, and cultures and their types of industry and economic foundations. Within the main island of Okinawa exist highly urbanized cities in its southern and central regions, while its outlying islands are comparatively undeveloped, lacking in modern conveniences but whose natural environments remain pristine. Such variations in social environments are readily visible in Okinawa precisely because of the many islands that exist within its boundaries.

As bodies of land surrounded completely by vast expanses of ocean, the uniqueness of island regions stems directly from their physical separation from external influences. In the case of Okinawa, its sub-tropical climate and topology as a coral island have given birth to distinctive landscapes and richly diverse eco-systems. Within the larger framework of Japan's history, Okinawa's unique historical past as the independent Kingdom of the Ryukyus has facilitated the creation of a culture deeply influenced by its relationship with China and Japan. Such cultural properties, along with its natural environments, now function as crucial tourism resources for Okinawa. Simultaneously, Okinawa faces ongoing issues in key areas of economic infrastructure such as energy and water supply. Politically, Okinawa also faces concerns such as problems related to the U.S. military bases within the prefecture as well as the wartime experiences during the Battle of Okinawa in WWII.

These characteristics of Okinawa are by no means peculiar to the prefecture and may be shared as common factors and issues mutually affecting other island regions both in and outside of Japan. Diplomacy and relationships with external parties, diversity in culture, languages, natural environments, and social elements, vital responsibilities of local communities, in addition to ideal trajectories of development for economic systems in island regions, are key areas that validate Okinawa's position as a potential field within which shared issues may be explored with fellow island counterparts. The collective assembly of researchers in regional science for small islands in Okinawa and their active contributions to academic exchange shall stimulate the field as a whole and spark similar research activities both domestically and globally. By academically and scientifically examining Okinawa and other island regions, approaches to problem resolution in response to issues faced by island regions can be disseminated as applicable knowledge to non-island regions that may also be facing similar concerns. In doing so, regional science for small islands may be established as an independent component within the larger field of regional studies while island regions, which until now have been marginalized within global society, may serve as autonomous bodies imbued with the capacity of leading other regional entities and also the world at large.

Notes

This article is a modification and English translation of the Japanese original by Y. Fujita (2019) found in the introduction (Preface to Section III, *Tousho chiiki kagaku no taieika no fure-muwa-ku* [Frameworks for the Systematization of Regional Science for Small Islands]) of Ikegami, D., & Fujita, Y. (2019). *Okinawa kara hasshin suru tousho chiiki kagaku* [Disseminating information from Okinawa–Regional science for small islands]. In D. Ikegami, Y. Sugimura, Y. Fujita, & M. Motomura (Eds.), *Tôsho-chi'iki-kagaku toiu chôsen* [*The challenge of regional science for small islands*] (pp. 9–17). Okinawa: Borderink. This article also contains additional, previously unpublished content.

- 1) The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was adopted in 1982 and enacted in 1994. The Japanese government signed it in 1983 and ratified it in 1996. It became effective in Japan on July 20, 1996, and the date is celebrated as the national holiday *Umi no Hi*.
- 2) The Remote Islands Development Act was enacted in 1953 to promote the “development of the economy of islands remote from the mainland through the establishment of measures to improve foundational conditions which are necessary for eliminating the ‘backwardness’ caused by their isolation or remoteness from the mainland and to promote their industries” (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2016). The act has been revised recurrently once every ten years since its enactment, with region-specific acts on special measures for promotion and development legislated respectively for the Okinawa, Amami, and Ogasawara Islands.

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