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Policy Strategies for the Creation and Management of Living Hubs
to Enhance the Living Population in Depopulation Regions

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Summary

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Following the 2020 ‘death cross’ phenomenon - when deaths exceeded births for the first time - South Korea’s population began to decline naturally, highlighting the limitations of existing policies centered on the resident registration population. In response, the government introduced the ‘living population’ system, a new demographic concept reflecting diverse population flows within regions. To activate living population policies, the government has strengthened multifaceted policy measures, including establishing regulations, calculating and publishing statistics, setting up special committees, and investing in projects through the Local Extinction Response Fund.

The living population encompasses not only registered residents but also people who stay in the region for a certain period for purposes such as commuting, attending school, or tourism, thereby injecting tangible vitality. It represents a potential population group that goes beyond short-term stays, forms connections with the region, and has a high likelihood of transitioning to permanent residency. Despite the rapid increase in projects aimed at expanding the inflow of the living population, initiatives focused on attracting tourists still dominate. These projects are often implemented similarly across regions without reflecting local characteristics, revealing limitations in effectively creating an inflow of the living population. Furthermore, there is a lack of spatial design and operational strategies that reflect the lifestyle and flexible residency characteristics of the living population.

Therefore, this study aims to establish the concept of a ‘living hub’ that can effectively support the expansion of the living population in areas experiencing population decline and to develop customized creation and operation plans reflecting the characteristics of the living population and local conditions. To achieve this, the study diagnoses the types and

demand characteristics of the living population, concretizes region-specific customized living hub project implementation plans, and proposes directions to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the living population system in future policies for depopulating regions. The main contents and outcomes of the study are summarized as follows.

■ Establishing the Concept of Living Hubs to Expand the Living Population

Chapter 2 establishes the concept of ‘living hubs’ for the living population through theoretical review. It examines domestic and international policy trends and private sector cases of creating and operating living hubs to demonstrate the necessity of establishing such hubs.

With the spread of new lifestyles like workation, dual-residence living, and regional living, demand is growing for ‘living hubs’ as a second living base, moving beyond the fixed concept of a primary residence. In Japan, ‘designated residential base facilities’ serve as a key instrument for establishing and revitalizing the dual-residence system. Accordingly, this study defines a living hub as ‘a physical and social infrastructure, as well as a comprehensive living support platform, that enables the living population to stay stably in the region and supports various activities that can lead to extended stays, relationship building, and eventual settlement.’

The government has established an institutional foundation through enacting the “Special Act on Support for Depopulation Regions” and the “Regulation on Detailed Requirements for the Living Population” and is promoting various policies to attract the living population, such as the Hometown Return Program and Regional Vitality Towns. Local governments are also expanding regional living hub projects by enacting Basic Ordinances on the Living Population, operating dedicated organizations, and utilizing the Local Extinction Response Fund. In the private sector, various stay-type infrastructures such as second homes, month-long stays, and workations are spreading.

Living hubs serve as mediating spaces that synthesize these trends and should be structured around three pillars: space (HW), programs (SW), and policy support (service). Only when physical facilities like lodging/residential spaces and shared offices are organically combined with stay-type programs such as local experiences, job opportunities, and cultural exchanges, along with administrative services like settlement grants, medical support, and lifestyle information provision, can a sustainable living hub be realized.

■ Diagnosis of Living Population Characteristics and Living Hub Demand

Chapter 3 analyzes the characteristics of living populations in depopulating regions based on Statistics Korea's living population data and surveys of these populations. It derives demand for living hubs across spatial, programmatic, and policy support elements.

Analysis of living population data revealed regional differences in the age composition, origin regions, and residency patterns of these populations. More than half of all regions were classified as having a population centered on the elderly, and they showed a higher dependence on population influx from other cities and provinces compared to neighboring areas. Furthermore, approximately 73% of regions exhibited characteristics of a short-term visiting or short-term staying population, revealing a structural limitation where temporary visits do not lead to economic activity or settlement in the region. Conversely, regions with medium-to-long-term stays demonstrated high revisit rates (44%) and consumption levels, indicating potential for extended stays and economic contribution. These results show that a key challenge for depopulating regions is shifting away from a short-stay structure reliant on external influx and strengthening sustainable stay foundations.

The survey examines the characteristics of the four types of living populations (visitor-type, experience-type, relationship-type, long-term-type), including their purpose, duration, and frequency of stay, and derives the demand for living hubs by type. Demand for retail facilities, lodging facilities, and health/medical facilities was generally high. Long-term residents prioritized rental housing and housing cost support as the most important stable settlement bases. Relationship-based residents showed high demand for community and activity spaces, such as multi-purpose cultural spaces, rest areas, and startup support spaces, to facilitate community interaction and repeat visits. Programmatically, tourism and leisure activities were central, though relationship-oriented residents showed higher participation in diverse local activities like learning, entrepreneurship, and community engagement. Regarding policy support, longer-term residents increasingly required package settlement services encompassing housing, medical care, and caregiving. These findings demonstrate that living hubs must be approached as strategic centers—beyond mere lodging facilities—where space, programs, and policy support are integrated to reflect regional characteristics and living-population typologies.

■ Deriving Key Factors for Attracting and Settling Residents and Policy Tasks for Sustainability

Chapter 4 analyzes cases of establishing and operating living hubs in areas experiencing

population decline to derive key factors that promote the influx and settlement of residents and policy implications. The analysis subjects were three regions: Byeongyeong Village in Gangjin County, Jeollanam-do (public-led model), Ibagu Village in Dong-gu, Busan (public-private partnership model), and Namhae County, Gyeongsangnam-do (private-led model), each demonstrating distinct implementation systems and approaches to utilizing local resources.

Gangjin County presented a model combining vacant house remodeling with experiential programs, thereby contributing to inflows and settlement of the resident population. Busan Dong-gu created a public-private partnership hub by establishing a youth entrepreneurship and cultural complex based on urban regeneration. Namhae County, centered on local planners, youth, and resident communities, built diverse cultural and experiential activities and human networks based on cultural/commercial spaces, rural experience villages, and workation facilities, creating cases of population influx into the region.

These cases all demonstrated that the organic linkage of space creation, program operation, and policy support significantly increases the potential for attracting and retaining stay-based segments of the living population. However, issues such as insufficient basic living infrastructure in some areas, sustainability problems in operating living hubs, and institutional limitations in managing stay facilities were identified, confirming the need for enhanced institutional support and operational stability going forward.

■ Proposing Region-Specific Living Hub Creation/Operation Plans and Institutional Improvement Measures

Chapter 5 specifies the direction for establishing region-specific living hubs and the project implementation system, reflecting the characteristics of population-declining regions and the types of living populations.

Based on the 'Living Population × Location Matrix', three representative types are proposed: ① Urban-Complex Type, ② Village-Linked Type, ③ Living Zone-Linked Type). These can serve as a flexible project design framework tailored to the location and demand characteristics of each region. The Urban Complex-type hub utilizes vacant spaces as a mixed-use residential, commercial, and cultural center targeting experiential and relational living populations. The Village-Linked-type utilizes vacant houses and closed schools within villages as decentralized community-centered hubs for relational and long-term living population groups. The Living Zone-Linked Type serves as a networked hub at the regional level, supporting long-term residents such as dual-residence dwellers and seasonal workers. Furthermore, a project implementation framework was proposed, including establishing a

collaborative governance structure involving local governments, the private sector, and residents, and setting up a funding procurement structure.

To enhance the implementation of living hub creation and operation, measures under consideration include regulatory exemptions for population-declining regions, rationalization of shared accommodation regulations, and the introduction of a '(proposed) Special Zone for Living Hubs' system. This system would integrate the Special Act on Support for Depopulation Regions, the Enforcement Decree of the Tourism Promotion Act, and the Basic Ordinance on the Living Population. It also emphasized the need to strengthen policy linkage leading to permanent residency by expanding the living population through linking the Living Population Registration System and the Hometown Love Donation System, adopting a package policy model integrating housing, jobs, and community support aligned with the shift in the operation direction of the Local Extinction Response Fund, and establishing a comprehensive living population information platform.

This study aims to present core strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of the living population system in revitalizing areas experiencing population decline. Specifically, it proposed plans for establishing and operating 'living hubs' to support the expansion of the living population. By analyzing Statistics Korea's living population data and survey results, and reviewing domestic and international living hub operation cases, it suggested direction for implementing region-specific living hub projects and proposed institutional improvements.

By comprehensively presenting the concept and implementation plans for living hubs as a policy tool responding to the new population concept of 'living population,' this study is expected to contribute to a paradigm shift in policies for population-declining regions. In particular, a tailored approach reflecting the characteristics of different types of living population and local conditions will improve the existing uniform policy implementation method. It will enable the establishment of a virtuous cycle system for population influx, shifting from short-term visits to the formation of lasting relationships and eventual settlement. This is expected to contribute to establishing the living population system as a core policy tool that drives new regional vitality and sustainable development in areas experiencing population decline.

Keywords

Depopulation Regions, Living Population, Living Hubs, Connected Population, Local Life, Dual-region Residency