

# MOBILISING THE ELDERLY FOR ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE LEAF BUSINESS IN KAMIKATSU, JAPAN

## Kamikatsu Town of Tokushima Prefecture, Japan—

- Kamikatsu is the smallest town in the Shikoku region with a population of 1 415, of whom more than half are 65 or older. Due to the combined impacts of societal aging, depopulation, and a waning agriculture industry, the rural town faced a stark economic decline in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- The Irodori Corporation’s “leaf business” was introduced in response to these challenges. The company brings together local farmers and the Kamikatsu town government to sell *tsumamono*: seasonal leaves that can be used as garnishes for traditional Japanese cuisine.
- The leaf business is a promising example of reviving a rural economy by making use of natural resources and the skills of an ageing society.

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- **Geographic scale**  
[City / metropolitan area](#)
- **Keyword**  
[Inclusion](#) | [Women](#) | [Unemployed and inactive](#) | [Older workers](#)
- **Theme**  
[Economic and community development](#) | [Local employment and skills](#)
- **Countries**  
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## What are the objectives?

**Kamikatsu is the smallest town in the Shikoku region with a population of 1 415, more than half of whom are 65 or older.** Although over 6 300 people resided in the rural town in 1950, the waning agriculture industry rapidly depopulated Kamikatsu and accelerated the departure of young people. Due to the combined impacts of the dwindling agriculture industry and shrinking (and aging) population, Kamikatsu faced a stark economic decline in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**To address these challenges, the local entrepreneur Yokoishi Tomoji decided to tap into a niche market in the restaurant industry by starting Irodori Corporation.** The company brings together

local community farmers and the Kamikatsu town government to sell *tsumamono*: delicate, often seasonal, small-sized leaves that add aesthetic value to traditional Japanese dishes. The “leaf business” proved to be particularly suitable for Kamikatsu, as 90% of the town is covered with forest. The elderly population could engage in the business as leaves are light weight, meaning the jobs are not physically demanding.

**Irodori Corporation strives to preserve Kamikatsu’s forest, establish a circular and sustainable economy and revitalise the local community.** Related objectives of the “leaf business” include:

- Replacing the Japanese cedar trees (the majority of the town’s forest) with deciduous trees to respond to ill forest management, which has increased the risk of landslides and other natural disasters.
- Making good use of Kamikatsu’s natural resources to create employment opportunities and increase residents’ income.
- Promoting civic leadership, with a specific focus on the elderly population and the skills of women.

## How does it work in practice?

**Currently 197 farmers are employed by Irodori. The average age is 70 and 90% of them are women.** Irodori decides the shipping amount for the day based on the order amount by major consumers and sales trends from the previous day. This information is then sent to all the registered farmers and according to the specific orders (i.e. kind, size, and amount of leaves) made by the company, the farmers pick and deliver the leaves to the pick-up facility, where the quality is strictly controlled to maintain Irodori’s brand reputation. Once checked, the coloured leaves are shipped to 42 wholesale markets across Japan, where they are sold in their early morning auctions on the following day.

**The “leaf business” is operated by Irodori Corporation in collaboration with the municipality, the Kamikatsu Branch of Japan Agricultural Cooperatives East Tokushima, and the local farmers.**

Irodori conducts the coordination of farmers, promotion, marketing, communication with customers, and management of orders. The agricultural cooperative operates the sales and shipping, while the farmers supply and package the leaves. Moreover, since 1999, Irodori is an independent semi-governmental corporation as the municipality is represented on the management board and supports the corporation’s finances.

**Digitalisation was a priority of Irodori since its foundation and has been a key factor for success.**

After receiving funds from the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry in 1999, Irodori began sharing information with its suppliers and markets via computers. To ensure accessibility for the elderly farmers, the company introduced easy-to-use trackballs for their computers.

## What has been the impact?

**The “leaf business” evolved into Kamikatsu’s new core industry – making use of the town’s natural resources and the unique knowledge and skills of the elderly population.** Since its establishment as a joint public-private company in 1999, Irodori Corporation achieved a steady growth, currently averaging approximately JPY 150 million (approximately EUR 938 900) in annual sales. The unique and innovative nature of the “leaf business” has also attracted visitors to the town, which, combined with the economic rebound, has become a source of pride for the local residents.

**Kamikatsu’s residents benefit from the people-centred approach of the “leaf business”.** Thanks to the jobs offered by Irodori, elderly women can earn up to JPY 10 million (approximately EUR 62 000) a year in their 70s or 80s. Moreover, they now have a newfound purpose which allows them to feel more fulfilled and satisfied in life with a positive impact on their mental and physical wellbeing. As a result, Kamikatsu has the lowest per capita costs of medical care for the elderly among all 24 municipalities of the Tokushima prefecture, despite experiencing the highest rate of ageing.

**The “leaf business” also sparked broader sustainable development projects in Kamikatsu.** The local recycling rate exceeds 80 %, thanks to the town’s ongoing zero-waste project which was partially inspired by the strong sense of social bonding and mutual cooperation initiated by the “leaf business”. Other sustainability initiatives have also stemmed from Irodori, such as KINOF, a business that sell towels from cloth made of harvested cedar, contributing to sustainable production of goods and forest management within Kamikatsu.

## What can other communities learn from this example?

**Kamikatsu’s new core industry, the “leaf business”, is a promising example of revitalising a rural community by adapting to societal aging and utilising its natural resources.** The town acknowledged the often-overlooked value of natural heritage, as well as capacities of the elderly in strengthening rural communities. The leaf business strengthened bonds between residents, and improved the financial stability, physical and mental well-being of the elderly population by developing local employment opportunities catered towards their needs and skills. Especially rural communities facing similar issues of aging and depopulation can learn from Irodori’s model of identifying a niche market that makes use of both natural resources and the skills and knowledge of the elderly population.

## Further information

- [Irodori Corporation | Bringing joy to people and society from Kamikatsu-cho, the town of leaves \(irodori.co.jp\)](https://irodori.co.jp) (in Japanese)
- [Kamikatsu Zero Waste Center \(Why-Kamikatsu.jp\)](https://www.kamikatsu.jp)
- [Zero Waste Town Kamikatsu | Zero waste portal site \(zwtk.jp\)](https://www.zwtk.jp)

## OECD resources

OECD (2016), OECD Territorial Reviews: Japan 2016, OECD Territorial Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264250543-en>.

OECD (2014), "Managing demographic transitions in local labour markets", in Job Creation and Local Economic Development, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264215009-en>.