

## The Potential of *Uguisu*, a New Community Currency App

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A: Is your local economy doing well? It is said that local economies are now in decline due to several factors: the decrease in a productive population, the decrease in the number of companies, and the number of young people moving to cities.

B: Do you often shop at large suburban shopping malls rather than small local shops? Of course, it is up to individuals to decide where to shop. However, this concentration of consumers in large shopping malls is damaging small local shops in some areas and it is difficult for the local shop owners to solve this problem alone.

C: Then, we are now trying to find a solution by ‘making money’. We are involved in a project named ‘Revitalizing the local community using the community currency called Uguisu’.

A: We are Riho Natsushima, Nanami Sakaguchi and Wakana Takahashi, fourth-year students of the Department of Electronics and Information Engineering in Ishikawa Kosen and we are members of the Electronics and Information Research Club. Today, we would like to talk about how we came to the idea of creating a community currency to revitalize our local community.

C: We have been developing a community currency through the invention of a new digital app for Nakanoto Town in Ishikawa Prefecture. Nakanoto Town is located on the Noto Peninsula. The population is about 17,000 and is aging. The town is trying to promote its sightseeing resources to bring more people into the area. We were very interested in the idea of revitalizing the community by creating a currency. A community currency is something that has the same value as money, but that can only be used in the local area, similar to local gift vouchers or points. It also has an expiry date, which naturally encourages people to use it sooner. It’s said to be effective in helping the local economy.

B: In Japan, consumption is increasingly concentrated in large stores and specific regions. However, the community currency can attract customers to spend more money at local shops instead of larger shopping malls. That can enhance the circulation of money in the area. Some people may think that it’s inconvenient if they can use them only in the small local area. However, they surprisingly have a lot of advantages and attractive points.

A: First, they have a high degree of design flexibility. The local government can choose the design, the name, and how it works. They can also decide how they value the community service and what can be exchanged for the money. For example, young people’s volunteering activities can now be rewarded with points that they can use locally.

B: Furthermore, they can design the app on their own. The one we are currently developing has a character of a nightingale or Uguisu, the bird which represents

Nakanoto Town. We wanted to include a lot of things about the town in the design to make the local users feel attached to it. For example, the body of the character contains the image of the town flowers 'Sekidousan Lily' and 'Cherry Blossom'. When paying the bill, it makes a bird sound, which makes both shopkeepers and customers feel relaxed. The app design can be very creative by using unique local characters or original logos.

- A: Another attractive point of using a community currency is that the users can find something new about the community that they did not know before. We have organized an event inviting families to promote the app at the roadside station, where various fresh local products and souvenirs are sold.
- C: Since March 2022, long before the event, we held meetings with the Nakanoto town hall, and tried to incorporate their opinions about "what kind of app they need", "what kind of tourism and community currency they want" and "how they can connect tourism and the community currency". The first meeting was difficult for each of us to understand each other's conception. However, as the discussions went on, the image became more and more solidified and the design of the application changed accordingly.
- A: Then we finally organized the event together with the town hall and the tourist association. In this event, visitors looked for a QR code hidden in some shops at the venue and scanned it with the app to get points. The points can be exchanged for gift vouchers for use at the roadside station. During the event, some children learned about local products such as ancient rice and spaghetti squash for the first time. They also told us that they were happy to have sweets they had never eaten before.
- B: Through the event, we were able to let people know about the local products more effectively. One parent and child scanned the QR code for Doburoku, and were talking about what it was. The participants had opportunities to talk about local products and the community. This time, 13 pairs of parents and children participated. During the briefing and pre-test, there were some accidents, such as poor internet reception, but all the children seemed to be enjoying themselves, and the parents also looked happy.
- C: Eight participants answered a post-demonstration questionnaire, saying that they had enjoyed themselves and they had become aware of and learned about the attractions of Nakanoto Town. Furthermore, they answered that sales in the region would increase because of the community points and we felt that there was good potential to make use of the points and the community currency app. The app and character we created also received a good evaluation.
- A: In addition, we were able to learn about which activities the children enjoyed, as well as their interests in programming. We were inspired by the children's interest in developing digital applications. By having children actively experience community currency, we can get them interested in regional economic issues and hope they will take an active part in the revitalization of the community.
- B: Community currency is not an essential part of our lives. However, it can draw people's attention more to the local community, which contributes to local revitalization. The key is how to popularize the digital community currency.

- C: One good example in Japan for promoting a community currency project is the Sarubobo Coin in Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture. The coin is very popular in the Hida Takayama area with over 20,000 users and over 1,500 member stores. It is the most successful community currency and has been featured in the media. We hope that the Uguisu we are developing will also become like that.
- B: It's important not only to develop a community currency but also to continuously establish it in the local community. Nakanoto town and our group held a mystery solving event on November 13, 2022. According to the questionnaire, more than half of the respondents used the gift vouchers we gave them in shops that they had never been to or only visited occasionally. We were happy to learn that our event contributed to the promotion of the local products and local community.
- A: Through this activity we have been able to understand and experience the contribution of community currency to the local area, and inspire interest in the next generation.
- B: We will continue to expand this activity and try to pass it on to our juniors after we graduate.
- C: Finally, last but not least, we'd like to invite you to take part in your community's activities. Use a community currency if available, and purchase from local businesses. Your patronage of them will stimulate and benefit your community, now and in the future.