Long-term sustainability of public-private partnership social initiatives: Design and stakeholder dynamics

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the success factors of three partnership projects aimed at addressing social issues related to aging population. It focuses on three cases of different scales, each spanning over a decade of implementation. This study used qualitative methods, including data from in-depth interviews with key officials involved in the three projects, additional documents they shared, and publicly available information. This study explores the interplay within partnership project design and stakeholder dynamics to draw its findings. Three key success factors were identified across all cases. A diverse set of partners that complement each other, enabling structure with independent operations, and the presence of feedback and improvement protocols.

***Keywords*: Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs); case study; social issues; social initiative projects; qualitative research**

1. Introduction

Addressing social issues, such as an aging population, requires solutions and project designs that go beyond typical short-term corporate social responsibility initiatives and traditional public sector interventions. These long-term challenges often persist for many years, demanding substantial resources, adaptive policy frameworks that reflect changing realities, and coordination of multiple stakeholders to effectively mitigate negative impacts. In contrast, the social efforts of most private companies tend to be symbolic or limited to short-term project activities. Moreover, the public sector often lacks the resources and capabilities to address these complex issues solely alone. As a result, collaborative partnerships between public and private sector stakeholders are increasingly sought as a more sustainable approach to solving or alleviating the adverse effects of enduring social challenges (Dhingra et al., 2006). Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) involve collaboration between the public and private sectors to implement projects through cooperation by sharing resources, competencies, and expertise toward a common goal (Mahoney et al., 2009; Quélin et al., 2017; Villani et al., 2017).

Due to their perceived effectiveness in addressing enduring social issues, there has been a growing interest in the study of PPPs and their operational dynamics. According to Hodge and Greve (2007), PPPs represent a new model for managing and delivering public services, this includes social welfare. Moreover, much of the research within management literature on private firms' participation in social issues is focused on the motive and outcome. Therefore, they are centered around the inherent tension between private firms' pursuit of social impact and profit maximization (Kivleniece & Quélin, 2012, p. 273). PPPs have the potential as a managerial tool to effectively address peculiar and complex social issues. Yet, there is a genuine need to further our understanding of their implementation (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). This article seeks to examine the project design and stakeholder dynamics of successful long-term partnership social initiative projects to identify key success factors. It focuses on three partnership projects aimed at addressing issues related to aging population. To enhance generalizability, the selected projects span different administrative levels: the first case is at a small town in Kōchi Prefecture, the second case is at a city in Aichi Prefecture, and the third case is at the prefectural level of Tottori Prefecture. All three projects are implemented through collaborations between local governments and business organizations, each with a successful implementation history of over ten years.

2. Public-Private Partnerships in Practice

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) generally refer to institutional collaborative arrangements between public and private actors working toward cooperative goals (Hodge & Greve, 2007). These partnerships vary in the degree of responsibility shared between the partners (Williams et al., 2003). They typically involve mutually coordinated activities characterized by shared risks, costs, and benefits, structured through specific agreements and arrangements (Steijn et al., 2011). Moreover, they allow partners to complement each other's competencies (Bryson et al., 2016).

While every market has its primary stakeholders, society is often considered a universal stakeholder, making social issues difficult to ignore. Many of these issues are complex and demand long-term solutions. Collaboration between public and private actors is increasingly seen as one of the most effective approaches to tackling social issues. For instance, in Japan, policies have been enacted to encourage greater private sector involvement in addressing social issues (Mateus Das Neves & Namba, 2023, p. 6). As a result, private businesses now address social problems through various interventions, projects, and partnerships with public organizations. Within management literature, research on PPPs and social initiatives often focuses on the incentive structures and outcomes for participating organizations. For example, Brogaard (2019) found that PPPs provide intangible benefits such as knowledge acquisition and network development. Similar findings across multiple studies highlight improvements in organizational capabilities, knowledge transfer, and innovation (Alexiev et al., 2016; Hardy et al., 2003; Loebbecke et al., 2016; Martínez-Costa et al., 2019). This article has a different approach. Rather than focusing on the motive and outcomes for joining PPPs projects, it aims to help us understand what makes PPP projects successful in addressing social issues. Using qualitative research methods, it identifies the key success factors that contribute to their successful implementation.

3. Methodology

The study uses qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with key officials involved in the three projects. This is further enriched by documents shared by the projects, both privately shared materials during this research and publicly available sources.

3.1 Research Context

This research examines three successful cases of PPP social initiatives that aim to address issues related to aging population in rural Japan. The three cases are outlined in Table 1. They are implemented in Otoyo Town, Kasugai City and Tottori Prefecture. Starting in 2012, 2013, and 2008 respectively. The numbers of private companies in the partnerships are 13 at Otoyo, 39 at Kasugai and 86 at Tottori as of August 2025.

Table 1. Projects Studied

Cases name	Projects coverage	Start year	Number of private partners
First case	Otoyo Town	2012	13 (with one focal partner)
Second case	Kasugai City	2013	39
Third case	Tottori Prefecture	2008	86

Source: *Author's own work*

3.1.1 First case (Town level)

Our first case is a project implemented in a remote mountainous town called Otoyo Town in Kōchi Prefecture. This project has been successfully operating smoothly since September 2012. Currently, according to the town's official website, it has a population of 2,916 residents at the end of July 2025 (Otoyo Town, 2025). This represents a decrease from 4,719 residents in 2010. More than half of the population is aged 65 or older, which means the town has exceeded the threshold of what scholars define as a *marginal settlement* (*限界集落*), a term used to describe rural communities in which over 50% of the population is elderly, aged 65 or older (Feldhoff, 2013, p. 102). Yamato Transport Co., Ltd. and other local businesses, in partnership with the local government through the Otoyo Chamber of Commerce and Industry, implement this project. The aim of the project is to help provide welfare and shopping support to the elderly population of the town. As the manager from Yamato Transport Co., Ltd. overseeing the project puts it:

"It (the project) was originally an idea of Town's members of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry… the (elderly) residents of the Town would place their orders with the stores nearby and will be delivered at a discount, when the orders would be placed in the morning, and we would pick them up by the evening." (Higashiyama-San, 29th October 2024.)[1]

The project helps elderly residents with their daily shopping activities by letting them place orders over the phone with local shops or supermarkets. The stores pack the items in boxes, which are delivered on the same day by Yamato Transport drivers to the homes of the elderly residents. Most of these homes in Otoyo Town are in sparsely populated mountainous areas and therefore hard to reach. The delivery costs under this project are partly covered by the local government. Besides shopping support, this partnership project also includes welfare checks for the elderly in the town. Therefore, upon delivery of shopping items the drivers also perform welfare checks on the elderly residents, informing the town officials if there are any irregularities. The initiative is a collaborative partnership between local businesses, Yamato Transport, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the town's local government.

3.1.2 Second case (City level)

Our second case is implemented at Kasugai City in Aichi Prefecture. It has a population of 305,902 residents as of August 2025 (Kasugai City, 2025). While the total population has remained relatively stable over the past ten years, the proportion of elderly residents has steadily increased. As a result, there have been instances of elderly individuals living alone passing away without anyone noticing, which has become a growing social concern in the aging urban communities. The city partners with private companies, including Yamato Transport Co., Ltd., to mitigate such cases

[1] Higashiyama-San is a manager at the prefectural office in Kōchi City, Kōchi Prefecture. With over two decades of experience with Yamato Transport Co., Ltd., he is currently overseeing the social initiative project at Otoyo Town.

in the city. The aim of the partnership is to focus on loneliness, isolation, and solitary deaths of the elderly. As a city official put it:

"Yes, as I have said, loneliness and isolation are social issues, and there are limitations to what a private company or a city can do alone, so I think it is essential to collaborate with private companies. And, as I mentioned earlier about projects like this, I think we need to conclude agreements with many more companies, and I think this is very important." (Abe-San, December 26th, 2024).[2]

This project is a partnership between the city and 39 companies to help monitor the health and well-being of the elderly residents in Kasugai City. It has been in operation since 2013.

3.1.3 Third case (Prefecture level)

Our third case is implemented at a prefectural level of Tottori Prefecture, which has a population of 525,255 residents (Tottori Prefecture, 2025). Tottori Prefecture is one of the prefectures that has experienced consecutive population decline over the past two decades. The aim of the partnership initiative, as a prefectural official shared:

"*The purpose of this initiative is to promote the creation of safe and secure communities in mountainous areas, and other such areas, by establishing a system for early detection of abnormalities in the daily lives of residents through collaboration between businesses operating in such areas and government agencies.*" (Morita-San, 12th December 2024)[3].

The project aims to promote the safety and well-being of the elderly population throughout the prefecture's remote and isolated settlements by establishing a monitoring network of vigilant private companies operating within the region. Launched in 2008, the partnership currently consists of 86 private companies collaborating with local governments of towns and cities within the prefecture. These companies assist in monitoring the health and safety of elderly residents as part of their regular business operations.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Triangulating data from multiple sources and across different time points enhances the reliability and credibility of the findings (Ozcan & Eisenhardt, 2009, p. 250). For this study, the primary data source is from semi-structured interviews. Repeated in-depth semi-structured and informal interviews were conducted with public officials and members of private companies. Follow-up correspondence was carried out via email, phone calls, and Zoom meetings. Supplementary data

[2] Abe-san works for Health and Welfare Department, Community Coexistence Promotion Division of the Kasugai city, and oversees the project.

[3] Morita-San belongs to Tottori Prefecture, Mountainous and Regional Development Bureau, overseeing the partnership implementation. Interviewed alongside her is Taniguchi-San from Administrative and Financial Reform Promotion Division of the prefectural government who is also actively involved in the partnership management.

from business publications, online resources, and materials from corporate and local government entities. In addition, several field visits were made to the communities spanning from April 2022 to May 2025. The interview audios were transcribed by the author and subsequently reviewed by a native Japanese speaker to ensure accuracy and contextual relevance against the original audio recordings. The transcripts were then translated into English for further analysis. Data from the three cases were analyzed through three main stages, as recommended by qualitative research scholars Eisenhardt, (1989, 2021), Gioia & Chittipeddi, (1991), and Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, (2013), These stages include (1) analyzing within-case data from interviews to identify reoccurring themes, (2) identifying cross-case patterns by comparing reoccurring themes and concepts from the three cases, and (3) developing and refining findings based on a replicable logic. The ultimate goal of this process was to construct an argument that explains the underlying phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 2021, p. 148).

4. Findings

After within-case and cross-case analysis, three main interlinking themes were identified:

4.1 A Diverse Set of Complementary Partners

The first success factor identified relates to the composition of the partnership. Beyond the fundamental public–private distinction, the partners vary in terms of industry and specialization, yet they complement one another effectively to meet the projects' requirements. For instance, in the first case, the public sector is represented by the town office and the chamber of commerce, while the private sector includes 12 local businesses and one multinational corporation. These partners bring diverse attributes to the project; local stores sell freshly made food boxes, alcohol and other beverages, agricultural tools, products, daily shopping items, etc.; Yamato Transport makes the delivery with its established network, while the chamber of commerce coordinates the project's progress and overall design.

In the second case, the local government strategically partnered with companies that have direct contact with customers within the city. As a public official explained:

"We have agreements with various lifelines (firms), such as electricity, gas, and water companies, also, with various newspaper companies, housing companies, such as UR, delivery companies such as Yamato Transport, banks, funeral companies, and food delivery services providers… If something unusual happens, they contact the city, and the city checks on the person's safety." (Abe-San, 26th December 2024).

In the third case, which is the biggest in coverage, the variety of stakeholders is also the largest in scale, including just on the public side: the Administrative Reform Promotion Division (行財政改革推進課), Hilly and Mountainous Areas Regional Development Division (中山間・地域振興課), different cities' and towns' administration offices, and the prefectural government. On the private side, there is a broad network of 86 private partner companies as of mid-2025. Each partner brings its expertise to tackle the aging issues in Tottori Prefecture. One of the public officials noted:

"In our situation, we are trying to cooperate and promote collaboration not only with private companies but also with NPOs, universities, residents' groups, and others." (Taniguchi-San, 12th December 2024).

This case represents the most extensive network among the three, in contrast to the first case with 13 private partners and the second with 39 private partners.

Across all three cases, the partners are diverse in attributes, industry, and expertise. However, they share a standard value: each joined the partnership based on a clear and meaningful contribution they could make to the project. This complementarity feature appears to be a foundational factor in the partnerships' long-term success.

4.2 An Enabling Structure with Operational Independence

Another common success factor observed across the cases lies in the structure of the partnerships, more specifically, how operations are designed and implemented. In all three projects, a notable characteristic within their structure is that they all have enabling structures that are reliant on partners' discretion to take proactive responsibility and actions in ensuring the effectiveness of the project. Rather than enforcing rigid, centralized coordination, the partnerships adopted a flexible approach with minimal micro-management of day-to-day activities.

For example, in the first case, when Otoyo town office officials were asked how frequently they are involved in the daily operations of the projects, they responded that such involvement is rare and typically limited to instances where new issues or emergencies arise. A similar perspective was shared by an official from the chamber of commerce involved in the same case. The official explained that:

"In particular, since the system has been established, we no longer have to ask them for help. Occasionally, when there is a problem, we receive a report or a complaint, but that rarely happens, maybe once or twice a year." (Maeno-San, 15th February 2024).

This level of operational independence appears to enhance efficiency, which reflects a deliberate design choice in these long-term PPP initiatives. Similarly, in the second case, a city official explained that while the city provides the overall framework for project implementation, the actual execution is primarily handled by the private companies. As the official noted:

"I think that municipalities and local governments can create the overall framework, laws, and systems, but when it comes to actually taking action and watching over [the elderly], there are human resource issues and limitations. So, I think we have no choice but to ask for help from private companies." (Abe-San, 26th December 2024).

In the third case, at the prefectural level, the structural design is slightly more nuanced. For example, the officials shared the following:

"For example, if you are a business that delivers lunch boxes in Tottori City, you will only be able to do so (to participate in the project) with Tottori City, but there are also cases where you will enter into agreements with three cities at once, including Yonago City, Kurayoshi, and Tottori City, as long as those cities are within your business area." (Morita-San, 12th December 2024).

Despite these contextual differences, the enabling structure for operational independence remains consistent in all three cases. A prefectural official explained:

"The monitoring activities are carried out within a reasonable range of each company's daily work. So even if business operators are unable to report an incident due to work-related commitments or other unavoidable circumstances, we've ensured that the partnership agreement clearly states this, so they do not feel blamed or held (unreasonably) responsible." (Morita-San, 12th December 2024).

These examples highlight a key structural principle: allowing operational flexibility within a shared framework, which promotes both partners' autonomy and sustained engagement over time.

4.3 Simplified Feedback and Improvement Protocol

The third common theme identified is the presence of a simplified communication and feedback protocol for improvement. In all three cases, these feedback and communication mechanisms are apparent in the respective partnership operation. As previously noted in the second finding, in our first case, communication and feedback are primarily event-driven, initiated when issues occur. Additionally, annual reports have been issued consistently since the project's inception in 2012. These reports were also shared with this research by public officials.

In the larger-scale partnerships at Kasugai City and Tottori Prefecture, this communication structure is extended further. Both cases have regular partner meetings, annually and biannually, respectively. where partners meet to review reports and exchange feedback. For example, in the second case at Kasugai City, a city official stated:

"Well, on an individual level, we only tell the person who made the report that we have taken action on it. But we hold a local watch liaison meeting once a year. During that meeting, we shared the number of reports, the nature of the reported cases, and the processes leading up to the reports." (Abe-San, 26th December 2024).

In the third case, the prefecture has a feedback and communication protocol throughout its daily operation and at a structured forum known as the Joint Collaboration Conference. A prefectural official explained:

"We have a conference body called the Joint Collaboration Conference, where the prefecture and companies discuss the initiatives, they have undertaken together. This conference brings together participants from the private sector, university professors, and others. When initiatives are reported, participants also receive feedback, such as 'This could be done better in this way,' which helps improve the collaboration. We've attended once this fiscal year so far, but generally we go twice a year to check on progress and report results." (Taniguchi-San, 12th December 2024).

Across all cases, regular meetings, reports, and conferences serve as simplified yet effective feedback loops that help maintain the effectiveness of the partnerships. In the first case, these practices have gradually become embedded in day-to-day activities. In the second case, regular meetings occur annually, while in the third, formal conferences are held twice a year. What is common across all three cases is that each includes a precise feedback mechanism that improves implementation efficiency. These protocols help maintain engagement and adaptation without overwhelming the partners.

To summarize, the long-term success of these partnership projects appears to rest on three key factors: A diverse set of complementary partners, allowing each organization to contribute with its unique expertise toward a shared goal. An enabling structure for operational independence that gives the capable partners the autonomy to act without unnecessary oversight. A simplified but effective communication and feedback protocol to ensure continuous improvement without becoming burdensome.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article examined three projects within their structure, processes, and stakeholder dynamics to identify what contributes to their long-term success. A key commonality across all cases is their shared aim to address social challenges related to the aging population. Another similarity lies in the longevity of the three partnerships studied, each with over a decade of history. Additionally, Yamato Transport Co., Ltd. is involved in all three cases. However, all three projects differ in scale, target population size, and number of partners: implemented at a town, a city, and prefectural levels.

The article presents three success factors: diverse and complementary partnerships, enabling structures that support operational independence, simplified communication and feedback protocols. Together, these factors help maintain effective implementation and adaptability in managing complex, long-term social initiative partnership projects. The findings aim to inform the design, management, and implementation of projects addressing enduring social issues. The results may be limited by the cultural context and unique attributes of the study setting which was mainly in rural Japan. Future research could test these findings in different cultural contexts, empirically study a larger number of cases, and in different geographic regions.

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