

Michi-no-eki – an opportunity for the rural economy?

Gavin Parker explains how the Japanese ‘road stations’ idea, offering locally produced food and providing a range of roadside services, could be useful in UK attempts to boost rural economies and communities



Gavin Parker

Above

Michi-no-eki at Tako, Chiba Prefecture

One can observe roadside vendors in many countries around the world seeking to sell directly to consumers and, in some instances, disposing of a seasonal glut. Indeed, selling produce in this way

has been a feature of the informal economy for a very long time, with growers setting up shop to sell fruit in summertime being just one example. It is axiomatic that local producers and craftspeople

need opportunities to sell their outputs, and most often outlets are located far from their place of production, raising numerous sustainability questions. This article describes how the Japanese have recognised and acted upon an opportunity both to formalise this type of selling and to provide basic services. Furthermore, it outlines how their approach could be useful in the UK and could assist in realising a number of policy aspirations.

Over the past 20 years the Japanese have set up almost a thousand *Michi-no-eki*, literally 'roadside stations', that provide purpose-built facilities for local produce to be sold by the roadside. Such road stations are typically partnerships between the national government, the prefectures (county level equivalent government), local municipalities, and local producers. Indeed, the idea has already been applied elsewhere using a similar format. As such, the idea merits consideration by UK and other European policy-makers, given the burgeoning interest in the provision of local food and local services, particularly in terms of rural economic development, and given the possibilities to add value to and shorten food and fibre chains.¹ This is also worth exploring in the light of ongoing debates about how to help release the economic potential of rural areas.² There are other potential benefits too, such as reducing food miles and the mitigation of climate change, as well as contributing to a healthy eating agenda.

Such a combination of factors has already resulted in significant pushes for a re-localisation of rural economies and an allied recognition of the benefits of enabling producers to sell locally. Indeed, in the UK the most high-profile outlets that,

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on first inspection, appear closest to *Michi-no-eki* are farmers' markets. However, there are several key differences and potentially several key advantages that *Michi-no-eki* present compared with farmers' markets on the one hand and current UK road services facilities on the other.



Above

Inside the *Michi-no-eki* at Takao

The Japanese also have standard roadside and small-shop sellers that operate less formally. These are known as *Choku-bai-jo* shops and are typically operated by small farming households³ seeking to supplement their income. The *Michi-no-eki* represent a formalisation and extension of that form of selling and of service provision tied in with necessary basic facilities for travellers, and they sometimes house *Choku-bai-jo* producer-retailers. A brief narrative of how and what *Michi-no-eki* comprise is outlined below before reflecting on the possibility and desirability of some form of policy transfer to the UK and Europe.

Michi-no-eki – a brief history

The first of these 'roadside stations' opened in 1991 on a trial basis in the Yamaguchi, Gifu and Tochigi Prefectures in Japan. There was a committee established nationally to discuss this idea, and the formal adoption of the approach came in 1993, when *Michi-no-eki* were enabled by national law and national guidance was produced. This established a policy which authorised and subsidised the construction of *Michi-no-ekis* nationwide. Since the first pilots were opened, 936 road stations were registered in Japan as of March 2010. This statistic demonstrates just how successful they have become and how local authorities, farmers and businesses have embraced the concept.

The inception of the *Michi-no-eki* idea derives from the Road Bureau, part of the Japanese Ministry of Infrastructure, Land and Transport (MILT), and was initially centred on the idea of establishing links between road users, as consumers, and local rural communities (as suppliers or producers). The logic of these road stations was multiple: central government had noted an increase in female drivers, older drivers and longer-distance drivers using the roads, and the notion of providing and improving basic facilities for drivers for rest was an important consideration. It was recognised that many routes (normally national roads, called *Kokudo*, or regional main roads, known as *Kendo*), should have places for people to stop and rest. Funding may be given to places where no other similar rest facilities exist in the area and where there may be a consequential danger of accidents due to driving fatigue.

While a similar system of networks of lay-bys and services exist in many other countries, they tend to be merely functional. In the UK, of course, they are typically franchise outlets with little or no local or green credentials and are found on the motorway network and along some trunk roads.

The aim of the Japanese road stations is officially threefold: to act as rest stops for drivers; to provide a point of local information for travellers and locals; and to provide an opportunity to generate revenue for local enterprises. The mandatory services found at a road station in Japan include parking spaces, toilets and public telephones, which are usually 24-hour services as stipulated by the national guidance. These are the very basic national government funded elements. The other service facilities such as shops and restaurants are not included in the national government funding for road services.

When the *Michi-no-eki* idea was first launched, the opportunity was taken by local municipalities to tie together such functional services with other value-added products and services. Other facilities in the main service areas typically include a large

market-style shop area with numerous small vendors running stalls, as well as restaurant space. There is often information provided about local sights of interest, local history and cultural events. The latter elements are usually provided by the local public sector or in partnership with local communities and businesses.

The Japanese have a rule whereby each *Michi-no-eki* cannot be less than 10 kilometres apart, although there are exceptions if there are functional differences for another one close by. The sites are selected using several criteria, including the convenience of location for travellers and consumers and the type of produce offered (or the functions of other potentially competing stations), meaning that the facilities should not abstract from the viability of adjacent road stations – although it is the case that some *Michi-no-eki* have attracted criticism for possible abstraction from other outlets. There is now a large range of services that some stations offer, including around 75 *Michi-no-eki* that have hot spring *Onsen* baths on site, while some others have accommodation or camping pitches, and museums and gyms are included in some places.

Extending the brand – *Machi-no-eki*, *Umi-no-eki* and *Kawa-no-eki*

The *Michi-no-eki* 'brand' has gained real traction, and now any existing facility (i.e. shops, museums, hospitals, schools, or city halls) can become designated as a *Machi-no-eki* (literally 'townstations') in Japan. These are the refined and extended second wave of the *Michi-no-eki* project that have been introduced and joined by some other variants, such as riverstations (*Kawa-no-eki*) and seastations (*Umi-no-eki*). By 2008 there were around 450 of such *Machi-no-eki* established, and this status can be applied for by existing facilities. While the *Michi-no-eki* are aimed at car drivers and other road users, the *Machi-no-eki* iteration is focused more on people whose main mode of



Above

A typical *Michi-no-eki* layout

transport is walking or cycling, or who use public transport. Indeed, some of the *Machi-no-eki* are located within or in front of railway stations to maximise their potential.

Some *Machi-no-eki* open for one day per year or are staged as *ad hoc* events, such as at Roppongi Hills in Central Tokyo with its *Michi-no-hi* ('roadside day'). This demonstrates how the profile of the *Machi-no-eki* (and *Michi-no-hi*) appears to be more similar to UK farmers' markets than the *Michi-no-eki*.

The process of *Michi-no-eki* designation

The stations are often featured in the regional development plan produced at prefectural level and as part of the strategies for area promotion or regeneration in Japan. Local authorities and the relevant road administrator (i.e. national/prefectural governments) are the key actors involved in designating the road stations and in preparing the finance required. There are two different capital funding types. The first is where the road management administrator builds the basic *Michi-no-eki* (i.e. the parking area, toilets) and the local municipality builds the shops or information facilities on the site, with the related cost shared by each body involved. The second approach is where the local municipality constructs all the facilities with the approval of the prefecture.

Different schemes appear to attract different levels of grant funding from the national and prefectural levels, depending on the circumstances and location. The road stations are often managed by the municipality or a third sector partnership organisation set up for the purpose. Some of the bigger ones are managed by the prefectural governments.

While the responsibility for administering each station generally lies with the public sector, other organisations will still have to undertake to maintain certain service standards if the public sector contracts out to such bodies (for example voluntary organisations) to manage the facility. Management and the distribution of costs vary on a place-by-place basis. For example, the Miyoshi City road station is run by a special third sector organisation, and similarly in Miyazaki Prefecture the Takaoka road station is run by a specially set up rural development organisation, whereas the 'Showa' *Michi-no-eki* in Saitama Prefecture is operated such that some costs are met by the municipality and some by the rents generated from the tenants.

It could be that in the UK context these models present an opportunity for community management of the facility.⁴ Indeed, this could be a model that has obvious benefits and has a more realistic prospect of being applied in the UK; particularly when the public finances are squeezed and given that these forms are smaller scale or less ambitious than, for example, a scoping project for an

'alternative motorway services' recently promoted in Gloucestershire.⁵

The success of the road stations in Japan persuaded the World Bank to endorse the idea and led to the production of detailed guidelines in July 2004 on how to build *Michi-no-eki*, aimed largely at the developing world.⁶ Some overseas *Michi-no-eki* have already been opened in East Asia and Africa (in China and Kenya, for example), where several have included important hospital or disaster prevention facilities/services on site. This demonstrates the flexibility of the idea, but at its heart the concept coheres around the joining together of services and the assistance of local economic activity through public sector, private sector and third sector joint working.



Gavin Parker

Above

Michi-no-eki road signage – Tako, Chiba Prefecture

Conclusion

Road stations have been successful in Japan and have been trialled elsewhere. As such, the opportunity to draw on this idea and to effect positive policy transfer from Japan into the UK context appears promising. There are some obviously attractive features and strategic thematic policy fits here, and such facilities also chime with the idea of trying to join up local services in rural areas, as has been discussed in England for a considerable time.⁷ The obvious drawback is one of costs and funding – particularly at present. However, smaller-scale facilities do still appear to merit attention.

In the UK context one further possible obstacle is apparent: that is the danger of abstracting from

existing village economies. This may be a legitimate concern in some areas, but in others less so, given the lack of local services that have survived in rural areas in the past few decades. Such stations could act as a method of stabilising and grouping services for mutual benefit. Equally, the roadside station idea and the facility itself can act as an intermediary between different producers and between producers and consumers who may not otherwise have spent money in that local economy. It is most likely that such stations would need to be situated on intermediary level routes, typically rural 'A' roads in the UK.⁸

The other issue that the Japanese have discovered given their already considerable experience with *Michi-no-eki* is that the management costs can be problematic, and the regulatory stipulation that certain facilities are available for 24 hours can impose extra costs that are difficult to cover. It also appears that a sustainable organising and management body is needed to operate the facility, and that a healthy turnover is required to help cover the running costs. Both of these issues could surely be overcome if the operating model is right.

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There are other variations possible too; as well as a direct copying of the idea we might, for example, look again at the way that existing buildings or facilities are used in rural Britain and also urge the development of more sustainable existing road services. The *Michi-no-eki* idea is at the very least worth testing as a pilot project in the UK and, if promoted and marketed appropriately, as a concept for communities to embrace as part of wider moves towards multi-service outlets or community-run shops. Such ideas could be supported through existing funding streams, such as the EU Leader programme or via Common Agricultural Policy/Rural Development Programme for England funds – both of which sometimes exhibit rather embarrassing shortfalls in budget expenditure and yet which already show signs in some places of embracing similar ideas.

However, the overriding points to be stressed here are that our current provision of services is poor, and the quality and credentials of our existing roadside services are also poor. In concluding, the *Michi-no-eki* idea should provide further food for thought for policy-makers looking to pilot schemes that simultaneously assist rural business and rural communities and that can help with both sustainability and climate change challenges, as well as connecting with healthy eating priorities and more newly repackaged notions of community empowerment and localism that are currently in circulation.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, H. Renting, T. Marsden and J. Banks: 'Understanding alternative food networks: exploring the role of short food supply chains in rural development'. *Environment & Planning A*, 2003, Vol. 35, 393-411; *Food 2030*. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2010; and the Department of Health's *Healthy Towns Initiative*, launched in 2008
- 2 *Planning for Change in the Countryside*. Country Land and Business Association (CLA), May 2010. See also the promotional content now contained in Planning Policy Statement 4: *Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Dec. 2009
- 3 See A. Kimura and M. Nishiyama: 'The Chisan-chisho movement: the Japanese local food movement and its challenges'. *Agriculture & Human Values*, 2008, Vol. 25, 49-64. The *Choku-bai-jo* label has already been applied in Australia for some farmers' outlets – see, for example, www.chokubaijo.com.au
- 4 Compare this with the *Communities Taking Control* report (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2006) and *Making Assets Work: the Quirk Review on Community Management and Ownership of Public Assets* (Department for Communities and Local Government, May 2007) and subsequent UK Government drives to encourage community ownership and management
- 5 An 'alternative services' that is similar in some respects to the *Michi-no-eki* idea was promoted in Gloucestershire in 2005, and is currently being pursued – see www.equal-works.com/resources/contentfiles/101.pdf and www.gloucestershiregateway.com
- 6 Toshiyuki Yokota: *Guidelines for Roadside Stations 'Michinoeki'*. The World Bank, 2004
- 7 M. Moseley, G. Parker and A. Wragg: 'Multi-service outlets in rural England: the co-location of disparate services'. *Planning Practice & Research*, 2004, Vol. 19 (4), 375-91
- 8 See Department for Transport Circular 01/2008: *Policy on Service Areas and Other Roadside Facilities on Motorways and All Purpose Trunk Roads in England*, produced by the Highways Agency, Apr. 2008