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ASSESSING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF COMMUNITY-LED RESPONSES TO JAPAN'S FOOD POVERTY CRISIS

Hart Feuer & Ayaka Nomura

Introduction

In post-Fordist food contexts such as Japan, particularly where a veneer of egalitarian ethos presides over a nutritionally well-versed public, fundamental crises such as child or elderly food poverty are encountered with a sense of cognitive dissonance. While agricultural and farmer-household crises have been simmering in Japan since the economic boom period of the 1970s, a complacent assumption persisted that the most vulnerable were at least achieving nutritional benchmarks. This general sense of appeasement largely continued in the realm of food security until 2009, when the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare first published poverty statistics gathered (but unpublished) throughout the previous decade. The high rate of poverty, comparable with that of the USA, sparked a panicked national debate out of which emerged familiar entities such as food banks as well as new social movements such as the *kodomo shokudou* (children's canteen) initiative. The latter trend has grown rapidly since 2014 alongside a spirit of self-organized voluntary activism that had been hitherto moribund in Japan, and has remained an optimistic corollary to the floundering efforts of an otherwise statist government response to the crisis. The simplicity of the idea of a community-based kitchen for serving children (and

increasingly elderly as well) who either lack sufficient food or companionship has created an easily accessible and inspirational frame for engagement. The hyper-local approach to food poverty has proved useful in managing the social sensibilities in each community, but has also led to a fragmented and unruly set of models. Already, signs are becoming visible of the movement's vulnerability to co-optation, waning enthusiasm, and deficiency of practical benefit. This paper explains both the rise of the *kodomo shokudou* movement, as well as its outlook in the future using a political process approach to the emergence of social movements.

Tracking the fascination with community-led children's cafeterias

In 2014, a documentary aired at prime time on national television in Japan (NHK) depicting the innovative community-led approach of the nascent *kodomo shokudou* movement in dealing with child poverty, kicking off a fascination with not only the concept of child food poverty, but also with this new self-driven form of voluntary engagement. The newly galvanized awareness was, by any account, a justified response; here was a photogenic, deceptively elegant solution to child food poverty. The basic composition of the cafeterias – making home-made food in a social setting – also attracted support from nativist elements in the society that understood this as a resurgence of a collectivist Japanese identity. Since the release of the documentary, the establishment of new *kodomo shukudou* has increased exponentially (see Figure 1), a virtual network has been formed, and at least one handbook for setting up new cafeterias has been published.

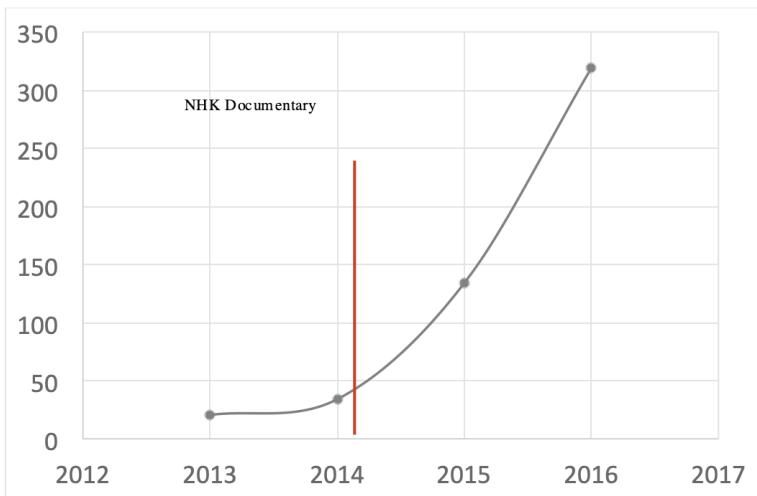


Figure 1 The growth of *Kodomo Shokudou* following the release of the NHK documentary (Nakatsuka, Kawai, & Yoda, 2016)

Even as the excitement for *kodomo shokudou* has grown palpable, judging by the extent of positive news coverage and interest from the government, analysts have started to back away and take stock of the movement's trajectory, relevance, and efficacy. An interactive Google Map of the known *kodomo shokudou* has been established to understand geographic spread, basic statistics have been gathered to determine the relative impact, and a trend in typologizing the different cafeteria-types has begun to make sense of the institutional diversity. While overtly critical voices about this movement are largely absent, there is a general concern emerging about the sustainability of this movement. This paper's focus is on outlining the nature of these concerns and evaluating their significance by unpacking the reality

behind many of the ‘growing pains’ that are invisible from macro-level assessments of the movement.

The evaluation of *kodomo shokudou* below arises from the work of various project members in a 2016-2017 project funded by the Toyota Foundation. The primary research approach is participant observation through volunteering, with additional data provided from intensive case studies and open-ended interviews with stakeholders in the movement (owners, volunteers, parents, and the children themselves).

Growing pains of community-led cafeteria

The shock and broad national outcry about the extent of poverty in Japan certainly created space and motivation for new actors. For their part, the government, which had hitherto kept its head in the sand, moved quickly to demonstrate its response with the 2014 ‘Act on the Promotion of Policy on Poverty among Children’. And among the general population, what might have previously been considered as socially clumsy attempts to feed children in strangers’ private homes were now embraced with gracious relief by a distressed public. In this sense, however, many of the headwinds faced by the *kodomo shokudou* movement in its first years were not unique to institutions of this nature, but rather more general problems related to chronic poverty, volunteering, financial management, and regulatory compliance. This article, however, focuses less on these generic problems and more on the ‘growing pains’ of the core idea of the movement.

Diversity or Fragmentation?

Since there is no playbook or discrete mechanism for proliferating a movement, the landscape of different local chapters can simultaneously be understood in its positive light (diverse, locally suited) or negative light (fragmented, nationally inharmonious). Following this, many of the first impressions about *kodomo shokudou* in newspapers, blogs, and social media have either misguidedly represented the movement as a singular, consistent type of institution or have expressed some degree of bewilderment about the apparent differences between the different local chapters. A more comprehensive attempt to come to terms with the discrepancies between local movements published in Yahoo! News by Makoto Yuasa of Hosei University suggests that the positive diversity (or “richness”) of *kodomo shokudou* must eventually consolidate to prevent public confusion and misunderstanding about the movement (Yuasa, 2016).

In typologizing the movement, Yuasa (2016) suggests that most current *kodomo shokudou* chapters align around two basic axes, one representing the range of *subjects* (target audience) and the other representing the range of *purpose* (children’s nutrition or general community development). Within this field, *kodomo shokudou* can encompass spaces that feed local elderly people and spaces that primarily serve as an after-school daycare, in addition to the model that fits the translation more precisely i.e. cafeterias serving low-cost meals to children. Observers of the growing phenomenon would not be misplaced in asking why all such activities must be lumped together under the banner of ‘children’s

cafeteria'; why not disaggregate into elderly support, babysitting, play spaces, and food education?

Based on our research, the answer to this question is twofold: to begin with, the 'awareness bump' about poverty since 2009 – and more recently in 2014 – has helped spark a general understanding that the central dilemma of poverty has social and material components which span across different sectors of society. Finally, however, the feeling of shock and helplessness that accompany such recognition can only be channeled into remedial action through manageable and inspiring narratives. In this sense, the narrative that children in a supposedly egalitarian developed country are going without meals was a clarion call to "do something" (Yuasa, 2016). As long as child poverty remains high on the agenda and visible in public discourse (Hanaoka, 2017), this inspiration will continue to provide impetus for *kodomo shokudou*-inspired groups.

Inspired by or relying on artificially elevated level of national interest?

The inspiration for *kodomo shokudou* has indeed relied on national level shock, but our case studies have also shown that they are rooted in and finally driven by local needs and conditions. A positive outlook on this is that local chapters are 'adapted' to each area; a more critical view would be that local chapters arose primarily as a product of the personal considerations of the founders and their ability to mobilize resources. Since it is unlikely that individuals capture the whole, or even essential spirit of the local community, a blend of these perspectives would suggest that the founders set the pace of a new *kodomo shokudou* while

the community imposes certain structural and cultural constraints. This explanation is aligned with the findings from local chapters that we have worked with in this study. The charisma, perspective, financial resources, and organizational capacity of the founders (*jiko jitsugen*, or self-expression) are the main originators of variation in local chapters, after which local community characteristics enable or complicate the original ideals. This is also to suggest that the founders are often driven by more general problems – i.e. those at the national level and in the public spotlight (*ittaikan* or societal commitment) – than the specific (and possibly unknowable) needs of the local community. In this sense, continued national focus on child poverty, child nutrition, and the *kodomo shokudou* movement falls in line with the previous model of civic engagement (*hōshi*) (Georgeou, 2006, p. 13), in that volunteering oneself to the broader national cause supersedes particularized interest in local problems, although it ultimately does not exclude them.

As Avenell (2010) has argued, the Japanese state has made consistent attempts to re-fashion the more impulsive, news-driven forms of volunteering into a self-driven individual commitment to voluntary activities of one's interest. While spikes of civic engagement around natural disasters (such as the Kobe earthquake in 1995) can be useful tools for reigniting the voluntary spirit and/or drawing in young people, many of the demographic, environmental, and social challenges facing Japan now require more sustained commitment. In our case studies of various *kodomo shokudou* from the main island of Honshu, we found that the government is increasingly attempting to play a facilitating role in the maintenance of *kodomo shokudou*, and major

financing bodies such as the Nippon Foundation have also begun to institutionalize support for *kodomo shokudou* (Hanaoka, 2017). While the participation of the government, typically through local municipalities, can be understood as a potential source of funding and regulatory relief, it is also the first steps toward more formal institutionalization and conventionalization of the movement. Whether this will compromise the unique grassroots mobility of *kodomo shokudou* in the long-term is a question we take up on a separate research, but in the meantime, it does point to a more coherent, consolidated and financially viable future for some local chapters.

Adapting or accommodating the grassroots mission?

In the academic literature on development aid agencies non-governmental organizations (NGOs), an enduring concern is over the unmistakable drift in purpose, or ‘mission creep’, that draws institutional focus away from beneficiaries and instead towards alignment with funders, governments and conventional ideology (Kamat, 2004). In the context of *kodomo shokudou*, these shifts occur in response to, among others, new sources of food (e.g. food banks), financing (e.g. government, foundations) and other resources (e.g. volunteers, infrastructure). In the context of this paper, it is important to point out that mission creep does not refer to the diversity in origin and style of various *kodomo shokudou*, nor does it refer to institutional changes meant to serve beneficiaries better; rather, mission creep here refers narrowly to shifts that occur within well-established local chapters as a result of divergent structural incentives.

Our field sites in the main island of Honshu and Okinawa suggest that, while the main impetus for ‘tinkering’ with the model comes from beneficiaries, more significant change arises when external conditions or incentives shift. For example, if food banks become involved in donations, they may have to re-negotiate the payment system, inclusiveness for certain groups, and planning process for cooking. In another case, the *kodomo shokudou* has become almost exclusively dependent on the regular food donations from a nearby restaurant, which leaves its mission to the mercy of a third party. However, the most significant future change is most likely to be related to regulation. *Kodomo shokudou* operators express regular, although not urgent, concern about the way in which the food provision, hygiene, and regulatory burden will be modified. The most dramatic changes will likely come on the heels of food safety or child abuse scandals. In one episode from 2016, a *kodomo shokudou* operator personally went to each household to apologize after the food had sickened some guests. With the number of local chapters steadily rising, the potential for national food or social scandals increases, which may prompt fundamental regulation.

Conclusion

City wards and hamlets in Japan have long developed a proactive response of ‘care’ based on the historical ideal of collective responsibility (*hōshi*). Well-established trends have been cultivated to establish regular neighborhood cleaning and tidying, social visits to elderly homes, evacuation drills, and fire prevention measures. *Kodomo shokudou*, a loose categorization of community events centering on food and sociability, arose in a parallel strand

of civic engagement that emphasized independent initiative with a hyper-local approach (based on the foreign-adopted word *borantia*). The *kodomo shokudou* movement arose during a period of dramatic public awareness about the relatively high level of poverty in Japan, in which child poverty in particular, had engendered a wave of new civic engagement that often followed natural disasters in Japan. The exuberance with which new chapters of *kodomo shokudou* have been established has captivated the public imagination – conjuring up nostalgic images of collective self-help at the community level and a ‘cultural’ solution to the challenges of child poverty. And yet, after five years, it is becoming apparent that the viability and sustainability of many local chapters of *kodomo shokudou* – and perhaps even the ideology itself – are on questionable footing. This brief paper has tracked some of these growing pains, drawing on empirical data from participant observation, case studies, and creative informant-level surveying.

Our assessment, based on examples from across Japan’s islands, indicates that the original grassroots framework of *kodomo shokudou* is less resilient than what recent media reports had suggested, and that many local chapters are under increasing pressure to formally institutionalize and systematize. While the diversity of the movement has been hailed as one of its assets based on the assumption that each chapter is adapted to its local needs, we find that most chapters are in fact primarily driven by the ideology and logistical talents of their founders. Furthermore, many chapters are dependent on structural conditions (donations, volunteer willingness, an available space, etc.) that are not necessarily related to serving the specific needs of local beneficiaries. The result is therefore not a patchwork of

culturally-appropriate *kodomo shokudou* over Japan, but rather a set of geographically-indifferent institutions inspired by the national discourse about poverty and driven by the unique capacities of their operators. The difficulty faced by academics in typologizing the range of current chapters suggests that the concept is very loosely bounded. This does not suggest, however, that *kodomo shokudou* are ineffective, but merely that they are not part of a movement with a generalized orientation that the public can support or criticize. The sustainability of *kodomo shokudou* as a movement, therefore, will continue to rely on elevated public interest, understanding about the need for a multi-pronged approach to poverty, and incremental rationalization of voluntary engagement to survive the long and difficult campaign.

Endnote

¹ See: <http://netatyou.jp/2016/01/10/child-welfare/> [accessed 13 September 2017]

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This book encapsulates the proceedings of the second Food and Society Conference that was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in November 2017. The theme ascribed to the conference was "Taste, Culture and Education".

Taste is a problematic concept in sociology and so is culture for anthropology. Using common sense, we tend to define aesthetical taste as a natural affinity towards the objects of our passion. Sociology has persisted in showing that this relationship is actually socially constructed through the categories employed, the authority of leaders, the imitation of intimates, institutions and frames of appreciation, as well as through the social game of identity making and differentiation. The debate therefore narrows down to the infamous structure/agency duality. Is our sense of taste socially determined? In other words, are our choices really our own? That is where culture with a big C comes into play; but again anthropologists have been struggling for more than one century to make operational sense of the concept of culture, as culture is not a given data but must be analysed or interpreted, depending on the school of thought you belong to. Education as a philosophical construct cannot be taken for granted either, as it may refer to the transmission of knowledge and enlightenment of the mind – the *skhole* of the ancient Greeks –. Education can also be understood as cultural capital waiting to be transmitted – or not – to the next generation; or it may even signify social control in certain contexts. This second Food and Society conference conveys the ambition of investigating the dialectics of these three highly volatile concepts, the former reflecting either culinary systems in-the-making, or social change at work. These dialectics may be seen as a circumscribed and specified manifestation of a broader phenomenon: the polar tension between cultural homogenization and ethnic revitalization. We trust that the reader will find some partial answers to those critical discussions in this engaging collection of essays about the food that makes us.



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