



From Grassroots to Policy: Kodomo-Shokudo (Children's Cafeteria) in Japan as an Inclusive Place for Everyone

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Abstract

Child poverty in Japan has become an increasing concern. According to 2021 OECD data, Japan's relative poverty rate is 15.4%, surpassing the UK (11.7%) and equaling the US (15.2%), with single-parent households experiencing an especially high rate of 44.5%. Weakening community ties, a rise in single-person households, and the decline of neighborhood associations have further exacerbated children's social isolation. The issue of *solitary eating* has also been highlighted, with 15.3% of individuals experiencing it more than half the week, up from 10.2% in 2011. In response, Kodomo-Shokudo (Children's Cafeteria) emerged in Tokyo in 2012 and has since expanded nationwide, reaching 10,866 locations by 2024—outnumbering middle schools in Japan. Initially launched to address food insecurity, Kodomo-Shokudo has evolved into an inclusive community space fostering social ties across generations. Although many operate only monthly, they serve 18.85 million people annually, including 12.99 million children. Policy support has grown with the establishment of the Children and Families Agency in 2023 and measures from the Ministries of Agriculture and Health. However, financial sustainability and policy integration remain major challenges, with disparities in municipal support leading to uneven access to these essential services. This study examines how grassroots initiatives transition into sustainable models, analyzing a case study in Kagoshima to explore local network formation and government collaboration. Through this analysis, we identify key mechanisms that enable bottom-up social initiatives to influence policy, offering insights for sustainable community-led interventions.

Keywords: child and youth support; grassroots initiatives; inclusive community spaces; policy development; social inclusion