



# From Grassroots to Policy: Kodomo-Shokudo (Children's Cafeterias) Coordinators and the Making of an Inclusive Place for Everyone

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## Abstract

This study analyses the development and expansion of Kodomo-Shokudo (children's cafeterias) in Japan, as well as their role in the global efforts to support children and youth welfare. Kodomo-Shokudo is grassroots, community-based initiative that primarily provides free or low-cost meals to children to address child poverty and food insecurity. These cafeterias have evolved beyond basic food provision to increasingly become vital community hubs that foster social inclusion, provide a place to belong (*Ibasho*), and foster intergenerational connections. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, including a comparative analysis of international children and youth support programmes, to identify the similarities and unique aspects of the Kodomo-Shokudo model. This analysis draws on the existing literature and data from public institutions and relevant organisations. This study also incorporates qualitative research, semi-structured interviews with practitioners and support members, and participant observation in Kodomo-Shokudo and support organisations. Findings reveal that Kodomo-Shokudo shares common goals with international programmes that address child food insecurity and offer after-school activities. Nevertheless, they are distinguished by their strong emphasis on community-led initiatives, multi-generational interaction, and the concept of *ibasho*—a place where individuals can feel truly welcome and accepted. This study identifies key characteristics of Kodomo-Shokudo organisers as social innovators, emphasising empathy, social responsibility, inclusivity, and altruistic leadership. The concept of 'response-ability' is introduced to understand their active engagement, ethical orientation, and relational approach to addressing community needs.

**Keywords:** kodomo-shokudo, social inclusion, social innovator, response-ability

## 1. Introduction

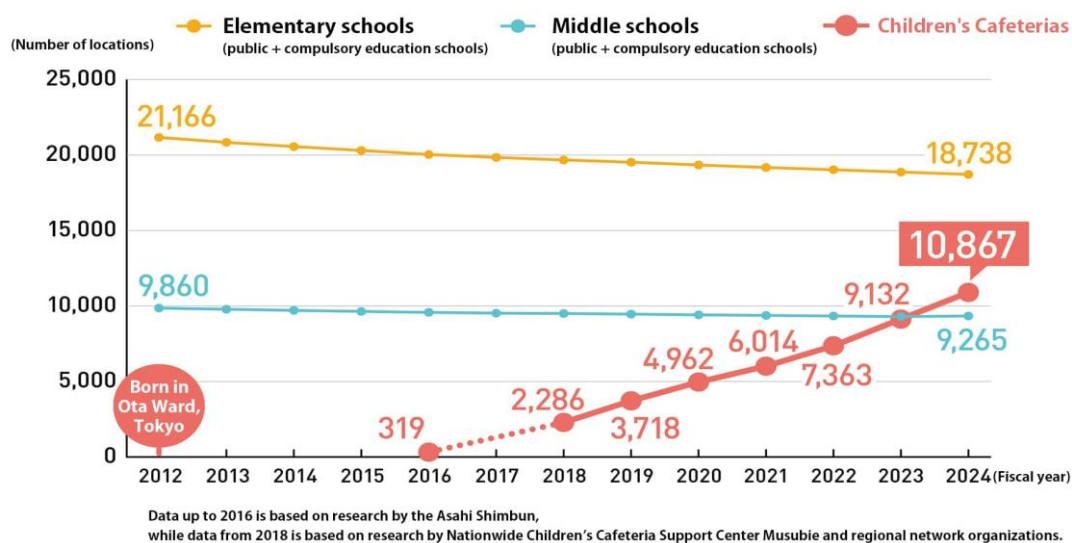
Children cafeterias in Japan, known as Kodomo-Shokudo, have emerged as a significant grassroots movement nationwide since their establishment in 2012 (The Japan Times, 2018). These community-based initiatives primarily provide free or low-cost meals to children, often in a welcoming and safe environment. Their rapid growth, with over 10,000 locations reported

in 2024 (Figure 1), underscores their increasing relevance in addressing the needs of children and families in Japan (Musubie, n.d.). Beyond providing meals, many Kodomo-Shokudo have evolved into crucial community hubs, offering not only sustenance but also a sense of belonging and vital social connections. These cafeterias often operate on weekends, holidays, and weekday evenings, utilising community association buildings, local government facilities, public spaces, and even private homes or corporate spaces (Sumitomo Corporation, 2025).

The rise of Kodomo-Shokudo in Japan is particularly noteworthy, given the prevalence of child poverty in the country. Although recognised as a developed nation, Japan has a relatively high child poverty rate compared with other developed countries. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Japan's child poverty rate between 2019 and 2021 was 14.8%, ranking 8th amongst OECD countries (UNICEF Innocenti, 2023). Furthermore, the relative poverty rate for single-parent households in 2021 was 44.5%, indicating a severe situation.

This is exacerbated by increasing concerns regarding child food insecurity and social isolation, which can significantly impact the well-being and development of the children. The emergence of these grassroots initiatives suggests a potential gap in the existing social welfare systems or a unique cultural approach to addressing these challenges. The broadening scope of Kodomo-Shokudo beyond basic food provision to encompass community and social support indicates an increasing awareness of children's multifaceted needs.

Figure 1: Number of Kodomo-Shokudo



Source: <https://www.sumitomocorp.com/en/jp/enrich/contents/0070>

This study analyses the growth of Kodomo-Shokudo within the broader context of international children and youth support initiatives in developed countries. By comparing them with similar initiatives in other nations, this study seeks to identify both the unique aspects of the Kodomo-Shokudo model and the common threads linking them to global child welfare efforts. Additionally, it explores the characteristics of individuals who drive such social innovations to understand the profile of social innovators behind the Kodomo-Shokudo movement. The study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that can inform policy and practice in social innovation and child welfare in Japan and internationally.

## 2. Methodology

A two-pronged methodology was employed in this study. First, a comparative study was conducted, grounded in desk research, examining the characteristics of Kodomo-Shokudo by referencing existing literature and the websites of public institutions and relevant organisations (Section 3).

Second, qualitative research methods were used (Section 4). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a practitioner and two support members for five sessions, totalling approximately 12 hours. To identify their characteristics as social innovators, participant observations were performed for approximately 16 days, from April to December 2024, with actual Kodomo-Shokudo and intermediary support organisations (Section 5 and Conclusion).

## 3. International comparison of food support activities for children

### 3.1 Food-based support programmes for children and youth in developed countries

Developed nations employ various models to support their children and youth, addressing diverse needs ranging from basic necessities to developmental and social well-being. Examining these international approaches can provide a valuable context for understanding the uniqueness of Japan's Kodomo-Shokudo model.

#### 3.1.1 United Kingdom

The United Kingdom (UK) offers free school breakfast clubs, which have shown improvements in students' behaviour and attendance. To address food insecurity during school holidays, programmes such as Holiday Activities and Food Programme are implemented (GOV.UK, n.d.a, n.d.b). UK youth clubs also provide social interaction and skill development (National Youth Agency, n.d.). Private, non-profit-led initiatives, such as the Magic Breakfast, also exist in the UK, which aim to address the widespread issue of child food poverty and its negative effects on educational engagement and overall well-being. By providing free, healthy breakfast to children and young people experiencing food insecurity, Magic Breakfast aims to ensure that students start their school day nourished and prepared to learn (Magic Breakfast, n.d.). Magic Breakfast has been shown to positively influence educational attainment, attendance, and behaviour (Education Endowment Foundation, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1.2 Sweden

Sweden has a comprehensive welfare system with subsidised after-school care programmes known as *fritidshem*. Government subsidies ensure accessibility, offering enriching activities beyond school hours. These programmes are often integrated with education systems, prioritising equity and aiding vulnerable families (The Swedish National Agency for Education, n.d.). The activities aim to support children's development and learning in a less formal way than classroom teaching, focusing on play, creativity, and social interaction.

#### 3.1.3 United States

In the United States (US), programmes such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provide low-cost or free lunches, impacting millions of children and potentially enhancing food security (US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.). Organisations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America offer safe havens and youth development activities

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<sup>1</sup> The Magic Breakfast study was conducted on the basis of a site visit and interviews with area managers on 25 March 2025.

focusing on education, health, and leadership skills (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, n.d.). In addition, the 21st Century Community Learning Centers provide after-school academic enrichment programmes in high-poverty communities (US Department of Education, n.d.).

### 3.1.4 Canada

Canada utilises the Canada Child Benefit to address child poverty, and is developing a national school food programme (Government of Canada, n.d.). Organisations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) offer after-school programmes to provide academic and social support (YMCA, n.d.).

### 3.1.5 Australia

School breakfast programmes in Victoria, Australia have positively influenced students' concentration (State Government of Victoria, Australia, n.d.). These programmes recognise the crucial relationship between proper nutrition and effective learning. By providing students with breakfast, schools aim to address potential issues stemming from food insecurity or inadequate nutrition at home, which can impair children's ability to focus on and participate in classroom activities. Organisations, such as the Mission Australia Community, offer community youth services to provide support for housing, mental health services, employment training, and community support, among other efforts, to empower individuals and improve their lives. Ultimately, they aim to foster a more equitable society (Mission Australia, n.d.).

These examples illustrate the diverse approaches adopted by developed countries to support their children and youth, often involving significant government funding and the establishment of organisational structures.

## 3.2 Development of Kodomo-Shokudo and policy formation

The emergence and rapid expansion of Kodomo-Shokudo in Japan are deeply rooted in the evolving social needs and growing spirit of community-led innovation. Since the economic stagnation of the 1990s, Japan witnessed a gradual increase in child poverty rates, a trend that persists despite its overall economic standing (Nippon Foundation, 2023). This economic strain has disproportionately affected single-parent households, which often face significant financial disadvantage in providing for their children (The Japan Times, 2025). Beyond economic factors, Japanese society has also experienced a weakening of traditional community ties and increasing social isolation, impacting individuals across generations, including children and older adults (Murayama et al., 2022). This erosion of social support networks has contributed to the phenomenon of 'invisible poverty', where individuals and families may be experiencing significant difficulties that are not readily apparent to the wider community (Watanabe, 2021).

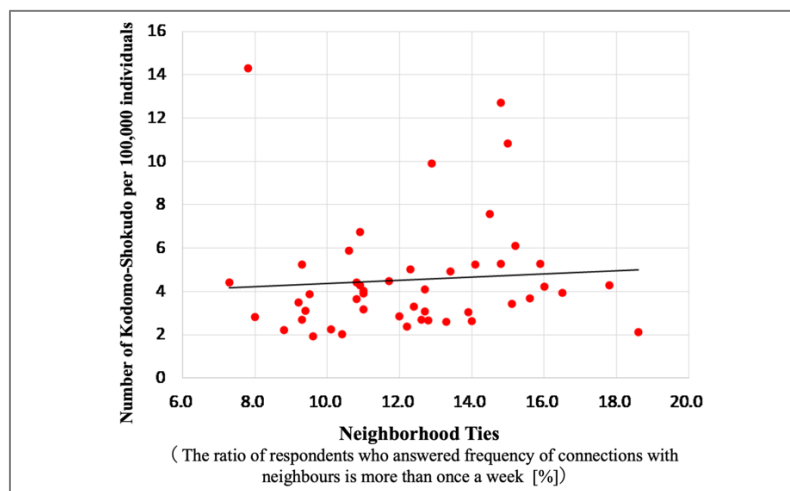
Picture 1: A scene from Kodomo-Shokudo and a typical dish



Source: [https://www.facebook.com/morinokodomoshokudo/?locale=ja\\_JP](https://www.facebook.com/morinokodomoshokudo/?locale=ja_JP)

As mentioned earlier, Kodomo-Shokudo not only provides free or inexpensive meals, but also acts as new community hubs, known as *ibasho*, which refers to 'a place or community where one can feel at home' (Tanaka, 2021) or 'a place to share joys and suffering' (Goldfarb 2024). Consequently, studies on Kodomo-Shokudo have emphasised the importance of community ties. Nanahoshi (2023) explored the development of Kodomo-Shokudo as inclusive spaces that aim to reduce poverty and address the needs of a diverse range of families and childcare contexts in Japan. Additionally, Yui and Yokogawa (2024) highlighted the role of Kodomo-Shokudo in community-based revitalisation, particularly in non-metropolitan regions, by creating gathering spots and fostering intergenerational connections. An ecological analysis investigated the relationship between social capital within communities and the geographical spread of these cafeterias across Japan (Murayama et al., 2022). This survey revealed that prefectures with stronger neighbourhood ties within their social capital tended to have more Kodomo-Shokudo per 100,000 people (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Correlation between neighbourhood ties and number of Kodomo-Shokudo



Source: <https://www.tmg Hig.jp/research/release/2022/1013.html>

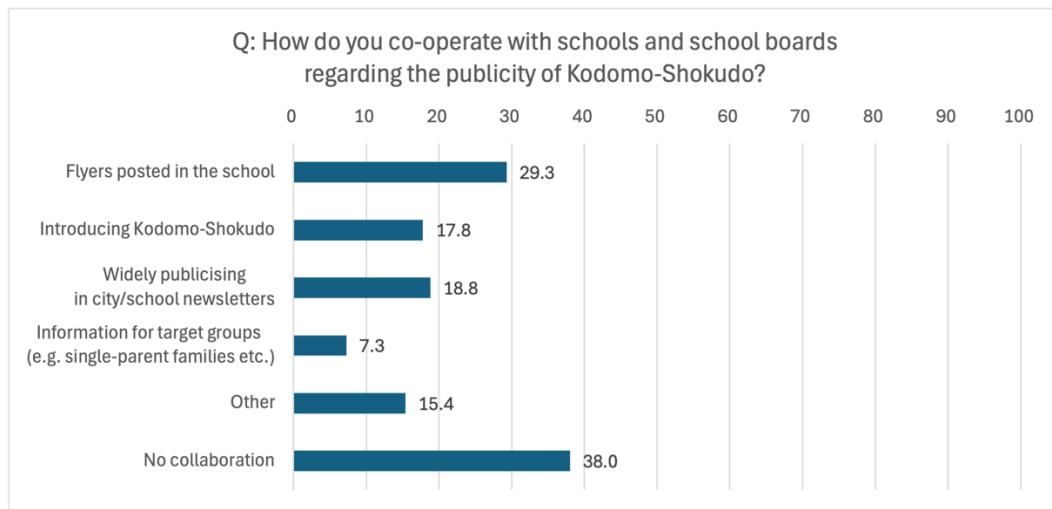
Furthermore, the development of Kodomo-Shokudo in the 2010s marked a period of significant policy change in Japan concerning children and youth, reflecting growing awareness regarding child poverty. This included the enactment of the Act on the Promotion of Policy on Child Poverty in 2014 and the establishment of the General Principles of Policy on Child Poverty in 2019. Further policy developments included the Basic Act on Children's Policy in 2022 and the establishment of The Children and Families Agency in 2023.

A comparison of Japanese Kodomo-Shokudo with international children and youth support initiatives reveals similarities in addressing child food insecurity through school-based programmes and after-school activities. School breakfast programmes in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia are designed to improve students' nutrition and academic preparedness. After-school programmes in these countries, as well as Sweden's *fritidshem*, provide safe and enriching environments for children. Kodomo-Shokudo and other programmes in other countries depend on volunteers and community support to achieve their common goal of addressing child poverty and its associated challenges.

Kodomo-Shokudo are grassroots, community-led initiatives that rely heavily on local volunteers and small donations. Contrastingly, many programmes in developed countries benefit from substantial government involvement or funding, such as the NSLP in the US, UK breakfast clubs, and Swedish *fritidshem*. Many countries have implemented both school- and community-based initiatives. However, in Japan, the number of Kodomo-Shokudo as

community centres/hubs has been growing due to delayed policy formation. Figure 3 provides supporting evidence on the inadequacy of coordination with schools and educational boards.

Figure 3: First nationwide survey on the state of Kodomo-Shokudo



Source: Results of the First Nationwide Survey on the State of Kodomo-Shokudo (Musubie, 2022)

Another defining aspect of Kodomo-Shokudo is its focus on multi-generational interactions, which promote relationships between children and older adult community members. Although some international programmes encourage community engagement, they often centre primarily on youth-specific support.

A cultural element that also appears to be a distinctive feature of Kodomo-Shokudo is the strong emphasis on the concept of *ibasho* as a place that fosters a sense of belonging, which serves as a fundamental principle beyond merely providing food.

#### 4. Characteristics of Kodomo-Shokudo practitioners as social innovators

In these evolving times, there is an increasing need for ‘coordinators’ in policy and community settings to foster inclusive environments (Agency for Children and Families, n.d.). These coordinators can be broadly categorised into two types: local coordinators for community management, who gather collaborators and build inclusive spaces such as Kodomo-Shokudo, and coordinators for promoting public–private alliances, who connect local activities to broader social networks. The Agency for Children and Families outlines the necessity of these roles, although information on necessary qualifications and training is currently limited.

Thus, this study aimed to determine the characteristics that define the bearers of grassroots social movements within local communities. The following section analyses some examples from previous studies.

##### 4.1 Profiling Kodomo-Shokudo organisers for social innovators

Individuals who initiate and sustain social innovation, such as Kodomo-Shokudo, often share distinct characteristics that drive their commitment to creating positive change. Their values are typically rooted in a deep sense of empathy and compassion for vulnerable populations, particularly children and families facing hardships (Austin et al., 2006; Bornstein, 2007; Yunus, 2010). They possess a strong sense of social responsibility and are motivated by a genuine desire to make a meaningful difference in their communities (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012; Perrini et al., 2010). Furthermore, these social innovators are often guided by a

commitment to inclusivity, striving to create environments where everyone is welcome, valued, and empowered (Seelos & Mair, 2005; Thompson et al., 2000).

According to previous studies, social innovators' leadership styles often emphasise collaboration. They recognise the importance of establishing strong networks and partnerships with diverse stakeholders to enhance their impact. These leaders tend to be empathetic, prioritising listening to and understanding the needs of the communities they serve. This approach ensures that their solutions are both relevant and practical. In addition, social innovators are typically visionary leaders who can articulate a clear and compelling vision for change, inspiring others to join their cause and contribute to the collective effort.

#### **4.1.1 Hiroko Kondo (founder of Kodomo-Shokudo)**

Examining the experiences and motivations of individuals who have established and operated Kodomo-Shokudo provides valuable insights into the characteristics of these social innovators, primarily from English articles. Hiroko Kondo, the founder of *KimagureYaoya Dan Dan Kodomo-Shokudo*, was inspired to start her initiative in 2012 after learning about a child suffering from malnutrition, highlighting the role of empathy in driving action (Tokyo Weekender, 2017; The Japan Times, 2018). Her approach emphasises mutual aid, fostering a sense of community support. She also contributed to raising awareness of Kodomo-Shokudo across Japan by organising the national Kodomo-Shokudo Caravan Tour that lasted two years in 2016.

#### **4.1.2 Terumi Tanaka (founder of Kodomo-Shokudo)**

Terumi Tanaka of *Tsuganowa Kodomo-Shokudo* in Chiba Prefecture (next to Tokyo) emphasises the importance of providing a safe and comfortable space for all, regardless of age or background, demonstrating a commitment to inclusivity (Japan Forward, 2024). Tanaka also focuses on empowering children by involving them in practical activities, even those considered 'dangerous', to enhance their sense of capability. Her approach underscores her belief in the potential of community-based initiatives to offer a welcoming *ibasho* and provide support for diverse individuals within the community.

#### **4.1.3 Masato Shibuya (intermediary support organisation staff)**

Masato Shibuya, who joined *Musubie* after early retirement, was motivated by personal loss and a desire to help struggling mothers and children, illustrating how transformative life events can catalyse social innovation (Sumitomo Corporation, 2025). Shibuya's approach focuses on fostering collaboration amongst diverse stakeholders and encouraging the exchange of ideas across generations. He plays a vital role in connecting community members to strengthen support networks and create a more cohesive social environment. His commitment underscores the transformative potential of personal empathy and experience in driving social change and promoting community well-being.

### **4.2 Case study: An activist's initiative**

#### **4.2.1 From personal motivation to local action**

This section examines the case of Ms. Aimi Sonoda, a social innovator who has been crucial in the advancement of Kodomo-Shokudo in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan. Sonoda, who is in her 40s and a former elementary school teacher, is also a mother of three children. In 2016, after encountering a magazine article introducing the concept of Kodomo-Shokudo, she recognised the alignment of its philosophy with her own values and subsequently launched *Mori no Tamasato Kodomo-Shokudo* in her neighbourhood.

Sonoda's initial endeavour began as a small-scale project involving her family and close friends. The initiative faced numerous challenges, including scepticism from residents and negative concerns from her workplace. Despite these obstacles, she expanded the initiative by utilising crowdfunding and disseminating information through social media platforms. Her sincere and persistent efforts gradually fostered empathy and support from the community. Notably, local leaders, such as neighbourhood association heads and welfare officers, were compelled to offer assistance in response to her visible commitment.

#### **4.2.2 Establishing trust and expanding the network**

In 2017, the national Kodomo-Shokudo Caravan Tour held an event in Kagoshima, generating increased interest within the prefecture. Capitalising on this momentum, Sonoda began supporting emerging Kodomo-Shokudo organisers throughout Kagoshima. In 2018, she established a loosely connected network to facilitate knowledge sharing and mutual support amongst local practitioners. Subsequently, Sonoda expanded her efforts beyond prefectural borders by engaging in inter-prefectural collaboration across the Kyushu-Okinawa region, which comprises seven prefectures in southern Japan and Okinawa Prefecture. In 2019, the Kagoshima prefectural government allocated a budget to support Kodomo-Shokudo, signifying growing institutional recognition of grassroots initiatives.

A salient characteristic of Sonoda's leadership lies in what those around her describe as a 'magnetic presence that invites support'. She demonstrates a readiness to act immediately in response to local challenges, even in situations marked by uncertainty or risk. Her openness to challenges and setbacks fosters empathy, prompting others to voluntarily offer support.

#### **4.2.3 Infrastructure for support and policy engagement**

Sonoda's strong orientation towards establishing trust-based networks is equally noteworthy. As of September 2024, over 196 *Kodomo-Shokudo* locations have been operating in Kagoshima Prefecture. Sonoda endeavours to maintain direct communication with as many organisers as possible, emphasising personal relationships and dialogue. Her practice of engaging in individualised conversations and adapting flexibly to evolving situations has been instrumental in fostering sustainable community engagement. Moreover, she exhibits a capacity for decisive action, including revising long-planned events on short notice when necessary to better meet the needs of beneficiaries.

In 2021, Sonoda established the intermediary support organisation *Kagoshima Kodomo Shokudo Support Centre Takushite* to strengthen the infrastructure for supporting grassroots initiatives, assuming its leadership role. This organisation secured funding from the Dormant Deposit Fund (*Kyumin-Yokin Kikin*) and expanded its outreach to remote and underserved areas, including outlying islands in Japan. *Takushite* has served as a crucial intermediary, facilitating collaborations between grassroots practitioners, government agencies, social welfare organisations, and private-sector partners.

Sonoda's case illustrates how a prompt, grounded action, combined with an authentic presence that naturally attracts support, can underpin network-based support systems rooted in interpersonal relationships. Through sustained grassroots efforts, these networks have not only contributed to improving local conditions but have also exerted influence on institutional policies and frameworks. This case study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of bottom-up social innovation and the essential qualities required of practitioners who lead such transformative processes.

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to answer the following research question: What are the key qualities for a 'coordinator' to become a social innovator? These case studies reveal several common threads amongst Kodomo-Shokudo founders and support organisers. They often possess a strong sense of empathy and personal connection to the challenges faced by children and families in their communities. They demonstrate a proactive and action-orientated approach to address these perceived social needs. Creating welcoming and inclusive environments is a key priority, as are fostering collaboration and establishing robust community support networks.

This study identified two key qualities. The first is 'altruistic leadership', which is similar to servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2012), but more fundamentally, it is not hierarchy orientated. The Japanese term '*Hottokenai*', meaning an agency eliciting help from others, is especially valued by the surrounding people for one's altruistic behaviour.

Second, to understand the depth of these coordinator qualities, the concept of 'response-ability', advocated by Japanese cultural anthropologist Hiromu Shimizu, should be considered. Shimizu argues for a shift towards a more engaged and ethical practice, reflected in the coordinator's role. For him, 'response-ability' means moving beyond passive observation to active engagement and commitment (Shimizu, 2017). This aspect can be observed in a coordinators' work: gathering collaborators, establishing systems, and promoting alliances to actively respond to the community's needs. Shimizu's call for an ethical orientation is central. The coordinator's 'altruistic leadership' directly embodies this, prioritising the community's well-being and demonstrating a strong ethical commitment.

Furthermore, Shimizu's emphasis on relationality is key. The coordinator's 'response-ability' is inherently relational. Their work is defined by how they engage and interact with others, mirroring Shimizu's focus on the anthropologist's connection with the people they work with. Therefore, by understanding the coordinator's role through Shimizu's lens of 'response-ability', profound appreciation can be gained for their work's engaged, ethical, and relational nature.

## 6. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical role of Kodomo-Shokudo in addressing child poverty and fostering social inclusion in Japan. These grassroots initiatives have evolved into vital community hubs, providing meals, a sense of belonging, and intergenerational connections.

Individuals driving these social innovations, such as the organisers of Kodomo-Shokudo, possess key characteristics, including empathy, a strong sense of social responsibility, and a commitment to inclusivity. Their leadership is often characterised by altruism and a deep sense of 'response-ability', emphasising active engagement and ethical commitment to addressing community needs.

Although Kodomo-Shokudo shares similarities with international initiatives in addressing child food insecurity and providing after-school support, its unique strength lies in its community-led nature, multi-generational focus, and emphasis on creating *ibasho*.

Future challenges include sustaining and expanding these initiatives whilst navigating the evolving policy landscape and continuing to foster the qualities of altruistic leadership and response-ability that are crucial for their success. Further research is needed to explore related practices and accumulate knowledge on practitioners involved, such as those working in Kodomo-Shokudo, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

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