

Empowering Youth for Sustainability Action in the Japanese Context

Miki Fukuda

Institute for Global Environmental Strategies

Research Overview

This study explores the barriers and enablers of Japanese youth in the sustainability field. While ESD and Environmental Education in Japan often remain in the classroom framework, a collaborative pilot program between a research institute and youth-led NGOs demonstrates how non-formal interventions can effectively transform passive young learners into change agents, promoting their meaningful engagement.

Purpose of Study

In the global context of climate justice, youth agency demonstrates transformative power, as evidenced by climate strikes in Europe and the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinions on climate change initiated by Pacific Island youth. However, the manifestation of such agency is context-dependent. In Japan, despite being a leading advocate for ESD, sustainability education often ends in the classroom and often fails to bridge into real-world political or social engagement. Consequently, Japanese youth face specific barriers, including a lack of systemic knowledge, limited resources, and the transient nature of involvement due to life-stage transitions such as entrance exams and employment. The purpose of this study is to identify these barriers and evaluate how non-formal institutions, specifically environmental research institutes, can contribute to moving beyond "tokenistic" consultation toward meaningful youth engagement.

Methods

This research adopted a mixed-methods approach. Building on relevant policy analysis, a survey was administered to 50 Japanese youth who were either interested in or already engaged in environmental activities, followed by focus group interviews to explore their motivations and perceived barriers.

Based on the insights gained, "Green Future Makers (GFM)" was co-organized with youth NGOs. The program included a systemic webinar series followed by an online action-planning workshop. To evaluate the impact, pre- and post-program self-evaluations and follow-up interviews were conducted. This longitudinal approach aimed to clarify how delivering specific tools, expert feedback, and authentic platforms influences youth engagement and their transition toward becoming active practitioners.

Results and Discussion

The implementation of the GFM program provided several critical insights into youth participation in Japan.

1) Demand for Systemic Knowledge and Time-Efficient Learning

A primary finding was the high demand for systemic knowledge delivered in a time-efficient way. In Japan, today's youth are extremely busy with academic demands and job hunting; they lack not only financial resources but also time. They cannot afford to spend long periods searching for information. While formal education provides fragmented information, our results suggest that providing the latest and systematic

knowledge that fits their fast-paced lifestyles. It is a vital first step for busy youth to start their journey.

2) Bridging the Gap: From Personal Habits to Social Agency

The study revealed a significant discrepancy between knowing and taking action. Most participants initially felt satisfied with just acquiring knowledge or practicing small personal habits. There was a massive barrier between these daily lifestyle changes and taking action or engaging in policy advocacy. Providing an "authentic audience" was crucial to fill the gap. By presenting their action plans at a high-level international forum, attended by government officials and business leaders, participants shifted their identity from "passive students" to "active practitioners." This professional platform helped them move from personal interest to a sense of social responsibility.

3) The Power of Intergenerational Networks and Avoiding Tokenism

Finally, the study revealed the essential role of networking and intergenerational dialogue. To move beyond "tokenistic" participation, in which youth are consulted without actual influence, the program facilitated direct interactions between youth and established professionals. This interaction was not a one-way transfer of wisdom, but professionals reported being challenged and inspired by the youth's fresh and unique perspectives.

Conclusion

For the Just Transition to be realized in Japan, the educational response must change. Currently, education often ends with teaching, but it must go toward building authentic

platforms for action. Non-formal providers can effectively bridge the gap by providing not only knowledge but also authentic spaces where youth can demonstrate their capabilities to society. In addition, the balance of the professional experts and “peers” in supporting youth in their continued actions is critical. Finally, the real challenge may not be just empowering youth, but changing senior professionals. This shift in perspective, viewing youth as equal partners and co-creators rather than mere recipients of education, would help reshape the direction. Mutual accountability across generations is the only way to foster the agency required for a sustainable society.

Major References

Fukuda, M., & Zusman, E. (2024). Meaningful youth engagement in sustainability processes in Japan and Finland: A comparative assessment. *Sustainability*, 16(15), 6415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16156415>

Ministry of the Environment, Japan. (2024). Revised basic policy under the act on the promotion of environmental conservation activities through environmental education. <https://www.env.go.jp/content/000222625.pdf> (In Japanese).

Sato, M. (2014). Outcomes and discussions from the UNESCO Forum on Global Citizenship Education: Reorienting global citizenship towards the collaborative creation of sustainable societies. *Japanese Journal of Environmental Education*, 23(3), 123–130. https://doi.org/10.5647/jsoee.23.3_123 (In Japanese).