

Food Issues

In Japanese media, food is everywhere. Turn on the television and you'll likely see a program featuring celebrities sampling food from popular restaurant chains, or a different celebrity traveling to highlight regional cuisines. If you head to a shopping mall in Japan, in addition to an abundance of regular food product options and restaurants, you'll likely also see special, seasonal products that are only available for a limited time. On the surface, food does not seem to be a problem in Global North countries, such as Japan. But actually, there are several serious food issues that many people do not realize. This article will talk about food insecurity, food waste, food access, and food sovereignty.

First, a large number of first-world nations rely on food imports. For example, more than half of the food in Japan is imported with Japan being the biggest importer of corn to feed livestock. Japan is thus very dependent on foreign sources of food for its animals and people. At the same time, Japan also has trouble with hunger and food distribution. Japan's relative poverty rate is the sixth highest among the 34 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries worldwide. The poverty rate in Japan is about 15%, and the first place people typically feel poverty is in their diets. A larger percentage of children in Japan—one in seven children—live in poverty and have irregular access to healthy meals. The pandemic has made this worse. The children's community and meal initiative Kodomo Shokudo has grown rapidly during the pandemic, almost doubling the number of locations from 2018.¹ Kodomo Shokudo is a volunteer-run space for children to get a hot meal, learn how to cook, and study—and initiatives like this are very important to helping solve food issues.²

While some people suffer from hunger, a second food issue that has gotten a great deal of attention is food waste. According to the Japanese government, the country throws away up to 6 million tons of food each year, with a little more than half of that from industry and food

¹ Katayama, Aiko, "Fast-Growing 'Children's Cafeteria' Provides Kids With Food And A Coveted Community In The Pandemic," *Forbes*. 19 February 2021. Available online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/akikokatayama/2021/02/19/kodomo-shokudo-provides-children-with-food-and-a-coveted-community-in-the-pandemic/?sh=5ada74362b8e>

² Kimura, Aya H. "Hungry in Japan: Food Insecurity and Ethical Citizenship." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 77, Issue 2, May 2018, pp. 475 - 493

service and the remainder from households.³ And while the government has been working hard to raise awareness of this problem, there are few concrete initiatives to address food waste.

In some other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, organizations have taken a community approach to food waste, through movements such as the establishment of community fridges. First used by a group called Foodsharing in Germany, the idea of community fridges spread to Spain, the UK, and the US. The idea is simple: set up a refrigerator in a community, and let people and food services leave excess food, while those who are hungry can take it. While it relies on a network of volunteers to maintain, the community fridges reduce food waste and food insecurity.

War also disrupts food supplies. In Syria, and the current war in Ukraine, disrupted food imports are a serious problem. Chef José André has a long history of bringing food to areas hit by natural disasters and war, and now he and representatives of the non-profit World Central Kitchen have traveled to Ukraine, where they make and serve meals to people who are unable to evacuate. Chef André and his team raise awareness of war and food precarity by sharing images of their work on social media: visits to refugee shelters, veterinary clinics, and hospitals.⁴

But no grassroots organizations--not World Central Kitchen, Kodomo Shokudo, or Foodsharing, are a large-scale solution to food insecurity and food waste, no matter how big they are on social media. But their work highlights another big problem with food, and that is getting access to it, even outside of war zones. Areas called “food deserts” are becoming more common in poor areas of rich countries, Japan included. Food deserts are “communities that have lost their own functions due to the withdrawal of supermarkets and other food retailers from the area.”⁵ According to food researcher Masao Kidachi, food deserts in Japan are increasing. Lower rural populations mean that stores close and new businesses do not open.

³ “Japanese “Mottainai” Culture: Reducing Food Loss and Waste.” May 2020. Available online: https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202005/202005_09_en.html

⁴ Hernandez, Joe, “Chef José Andrés and his team are feeding Ukrainians on the front lines of the war.” NPR. 13 March 2022. Available online: <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/12/1086309022/ukraine-jose-andres-interview-world-central-kitchen>

⁵ Kidachi, Manao, “What are food deserts?” *Chuo Online*. Available online: <https://yab.yomiuri.co.jp/adv/chuo/dy/opinion/20101101.html>

This often hurts residents in rural communities, who are typically elderly.⁶ Without transportation, the food they can access is not always fresh and it can be very expensive.

Finally, food sovereignty is an important issue for many communities that is rarely addressed. In Japan, a great deal of popular culture presents Japanese cuisine as a part of Japan's national identity. Manga like *Oishinbo*, *Yakitate*, or *Moyashimon* present Japanese food essential to Japanese national identity. But lost within such popular images is the fact that Japan is increasingly out of touch with its traditional agricultural and food production methods: again, more than 60% of Japanese food is now imported rather than sustainably produced using traditional methods. Even further erased are the food traditions of indigenous populations such as the Ainu or the Uchinanchu people. For both the Ainu and the Uchinanchu people, the Japanese government has taken away their rights to the land and animals that are a part of their cultural heritage. While the Ainu have recently sued the Japanese government for a restoration of their ancestral salmon fishing rights, indigenous people in Japan face extra challenges to their food security and sovereignty.⁷ The right of indigenous populations to practice their food traditions is increasingly under threat all over the world.

When we think of food problems in the world, it is tempting to stop with SDG 2, “Zero Hunger.” But in fact, food issues are deep and complicated, ranging from indigenous food sovereignty, cultural nationalism in food culture, food insecurity, and food waste. What issues do you think are the most important for the world? What do you think are the most important for Japan?

⁶ Ikejima Y. (2015) The Reality of Food Deserts in a Large Japanese City and Their Resolution Using Urban Agriculture. In: Hongladarom S. (eds) Food Security and Food Safety for the Twenty-first Century. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-417-7_18

⁷ Ainu lawsuit over fishing rights test case for much larger issues. Asahi Shimbun. 18 August 2020. Available online: <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13646254>

Your name:

1. Underline or highlight the sentence that expresses the main ideas in each paragraph (the topic sentence).
2. Write 5 difficult vocabulary words from the article and their Japanese meaning.
 - i.
 - ii.
 - iii.
 - iv.
 - v.
3. Think of two open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no) about the reading. Write the questions (but not the answer) here.
 - i)
 - ii)
4. Write your opinion! What do you think about this article? What do you agree with? What do you disagree with? Why? (Please write your opinion in 5 or more sentences.)

5. Your own research! Pick ONE of the following options about topics covered in the reading and do further research on it. Summarize your findings and give your opinion IN ONE PARAGRAPH.

Option 1: **Foreign news:** Read an article from a news source (newspapers or magazines) about foreign food sovereignty issues. Here are some useful links: [food sovereignty](https://www.foodsovereignty.org/news-resources/), www.foodsovereignty.org/news-resources/

Option 2: **Foreign pop culture:** Visit the social media of an NPO or grassroots organization such as community fridge projects or World Central Kitchen. Here are some useful links: [wckitchen on twitter](#), [wckitchen on Facebook](#), [community fridge on twitter](#), [community fridge on youtube](#)

Option 3: **Japanese news:** Read news about an NPO or grassroots organization such as Kodomo Shokudo. Here is a useful link: [articles about kodomo shokudo](#)

Option 4: **Japanese pop culture:** How is washoku represented on YouTube? Watch a program that features washoku to write your report. Here is a useful link: [washoku on youtube](#)

To help you write your summary, ask yourself these questions:

What key issues are highlighted? How are they represented? Do you agree or disagree? Why? Please try to write your summary in 5 or more sentences. You will be presenting this to your classmates next class.
