

# Leadership in Action

## Young People and Civil Society in Japan

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### Introduction

I would find it difficult to fully describe my time in Japan in a succinct way. I learned a lot while there, both about Japan - and its young people and civil society - and myself. Having been in Japan for 4 weeks, and in Asia for just over 6 in total, I found myself exposed to environments far different to what I was used to seeing at home, in the UK, and within Europe more broadly. As such, my perspective, as a whole, changed significantly, and I credit my time there as a major contributor to my development as a person and global citizen. However, one thing I am certain of, is that my time in Japan and the work I did as part of my LiA have been defined by the people I was with. I was bewitched by the vigour of the people I worked alongside, and by their passion for tackling issues facing young people and others, in Japan and worldwide. The kindness and empathy exhibited by volunteers and full-time members of NGOs and NPOs I was fortunate enough to meet was truly inspiring.

I hope that this reflective piece illustrates the above, as I go through the milestones of my work in the country, and highlight some of the key takeaways I observed about Japanese civil society and its capacity for youth engagement.

### Main Body

Before I begin, I will outline my reasons for deciding on this particular theme for my LiA, and explain how I was able to secure my activities and collaboration with the individuals and organisations featured in this piece.

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I have been involved in youth politics and activism for nearly five years now. I began working in youth voice in 2021 after being elected as a member of the [County Youth Council of Leicestershire \(CYCLe\)](#), where I consulted local services on youth matters and joined the hiring committee for the county's youth services. I was then elected as [Member of Youth Parliament](#) for Leicestershire the following year, and represented over 300,000 young people in the House of Commons as the East Midlands Debate Lead in the [2022 annual UKYP debate](#). My [research](#) for the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme also focused on youth issues - namely the policy influences on extra-curricular provisions in the UK.

Other work I have done since becoming involved in youth issues was with [Leaders Unlocked](#), a social enterprise focused on providing young people the opportunity to consult and work with researchers and decision-makers in the UK to make positive change within British education, policing, health, and the criminal justice system. This included research with [LSE](#), and the [CO-SPACE Initiative](#). My involvement with the CO-SPACE Initiative is what led me to working with Japanese researchers from the [National Center for Child Health and Development \(NCCHD\)](#), and in particular Dr. Naho Morisaki, who kindly introduced me to Yoichi Zuzuki, the founder and director of [Wake Up Japan](#).

## **Wake Up Japan**

Wake Up Japan is a non-profit organisation (NPO) founded in 2016 by Yoichi Zuzuki, a veteran of OXFAM Japan and a number of other NGOs and NPOs in the country, as well as a committed Model UN participant and organiser during his time at university. The organisation focuses on educating and empowering members of Japanese society - particularly students and young people - to understand social issues pertinent to both the context of Japan and abroad, and thus enable proactive engagement in their solution. Wake Up Japan collaborates with many organisations within Japanese civil society, leading workshops, interviews, and campaigns to further their objectives. I personally found the NPO to be a major contributor to the interconnectivity of Japanese third sector organisations, and a great source of good practice dissemination among them.

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Yoichi, and therefore Wake Up Japan, were my main point of contact during my time in Japan, and coordinated my work with them and other organisations. Without Yoichi's cooperation and incredibly kind hospitality, I would not have achieved the same reach and impact with my volunteering, nor would I have been able to learn and understand the cultural differences and sociopolitical contexts that frame Japanese society and underpin my areas of interest.

Yoichi, thank you for your kindness and priceless insight.

## **Timeline**

I will now outline a short chronological description of my activities within Japan. During my stay, in between preparing for and attending these wonderful events, I was able to take the time to explore and appreciate different parts of the Kanagawa Prefecture and Tokyo Metropolitan Area, too. To stay within the word count, I will omit these lovely experiences, but I will add some photos to the end of this document with some of the locations I explored.

### **Hayama Town Hall**

I began, and actually ended, my LiA programme in the Hayama Town Hall. Wake Up Japan is based out of this quaint fishing town on the coast of Sagami Bay, and holds most of its regular meetings online. However, Yoichi and the organisation still participate in local community projects and consultations within Hayama and Zushi, the neighbouring beach town popular with US navy personnel stationed in the area. During my LiA, I was invited to the Hayama Town Hall for two purposes:

1. For an interview/consult on the subject of engaging young people in sustainable practices at home, such as recycling, using reusable water bottles, and composting.

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The ban on single-use plastics, EU bottle caps, and the British approach to keep-cups seemed to be of particular interest to Hayama's sustainability team, whilst I was heavily impressed by their subsidised composting initiative and how they are able to keep the streets clean even without the prevalence of public bins. My contributions were added to the town's local newsletter.

2. For another interview/consult on the concept of youth bodies within local and national governing bodies. This concept is fairly popular with the UK and, given my aforementioned experiences within such organisations, a number of individuals from various departments were interested in hearing how they operate within the UK and the principles they are founded on. This concept is slowly being trialed by some local constituencies within Japan, and I hope to see them expand and improve to solidify youth engagement in Japan.

## **Zushi Fair Trade Training**

In my second initiative, I worked with Wake Up Japan, and the Zushi Fair Trade Initiative to run a weekend-long workshop on the subject of social action through sustainability and Fair Trade. Zushi is one of few [Fair Trade Towns in Japan](#), a concept that began in Lancashire.

The workshop, which was split into two days, educated an estimate of 15 young people (from junior high-school to university freshers) on the history and principles of the Fair Trade organisation, as well as other sustainable practices. I, in particular, ran a session on how young people engage in social action in the UK and how similar initiatives exist in Japan, encouraging the students to use their voice to bring about positive changes in the local community. One of my favourite parts was the practical session, which involved visiting the town's oldest Fair Trade shop, which was started by a couple in 1977 with the purpose of looking after their health - it has since evolved to address global issues through providing sustainably sourced products (selected through a painstakingly diligent process) and educating its customers.

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## Take Action Camp

The Take Action Camp is an annual multi-day summer camp for school students ranging from elementary to senior high school, organised by [Free the Children Japan](#). It was hosted in the National Chuo Youth Friendship Center, located in Gotamba, directly across the USMC's Camp Fuji. There, I acted as a facilitator/teacher throughout, and ran a workshop on broader engagement in social action, using my previous experiences to demonstrate the principles and practice of social action. The students were all incredibly inquisitive about how we do things in the UK, and more than willing to share their experiences in Japan. Throughout my time at Gotemba, I learned a lot about the Japanese education system, and met a number of incredibly inspiring young people, as well as dedicated staff from FTCJ; this included the incredibly passionate Yuki, who balanced her commitments to the organisation with her full time work as a nurse.

## TICAD-9

The Ninth Tokyo International Conference on African Development ([TICAD-9](#)), was a three-day event in Yokohama, a city on the outskirts of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, famed for its ports. TICAD-9 is organised annually by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), which funds and supports a number of ventures within Africa, and is divided into two main categories - the business and government/humanitarian sections.

During the conference, I worked alongside a number of NGOs to set up and document a side event, focused on Japanese investment and NGO work in education in Africa. We were incredibly pleasantly surprised to find that the Japanese Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Toshiko Abe, decided to attend the event, alongside a number of other key decision-makers from the Japanese Congress and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The event went incredibly well, with a number of incredible speakers from a number of NGOs and UNESCO, and ending with high-school students (supported by the NGOs) presenting a young-people-approved policy request to the MoFA on their continued involvement in supporting African education.

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I also attended one of the other days independently, as a guest, to look at some of the other exhibitions. I was particularly impressed by some of the newly patented water filtration technology from Shinshu University, and pleasantly surprised to see how much interest Japanese companies have in Africa, especially those necessary for development, such as heavy industry and insurance/financial institutions.

## **Africa Insight**

During my time in Yokohama, I also made a short presentation on the perception of Africa among young Britons at an event co-hosted by Wake Up Japan and [Africa Insight](#), a South Korean non-profit organisation started in 2013 aiming to raise awareness and educate people about African development in South Korea and globally. While small, I believe this event to have been a success, bringing together Japanese and Korean activists, and sharing great insights into the way organisations in both countries approach African issues both domestically and when working abroad.

The following day, I also had the pleasure and honour of interviewing Steven Heo, the founder of Africa Insight. During my last two years at the University of Oxford, and during my work in adjacent areas of interest, I had the opportunity of meeting a great number of incredibly insightful, well-educated, and inspiring people. However, Steven remains one of the most notable. I will be posting my summary of the interview soon and will link it as one of the relevant documents on the Laidlaw Scholars Network; feel free to have a read.

## **Work in Tokyo**

The next few items on the agenda included sections at events organised together by a number of different organisations. To stay within the word count, I will summarise them together as one section.

I was invited to present and join a panel discussion on the subject of youth engagement in civic action in Japan at an event organised by multiple NPOs and hosted by Deloitte. I had the pleasure of finally meeting the Japanese researchers and young people I have worked

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with virtually on a research project on the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on mental health of young people as part of the aforementioned CO-SPACE Initiative.

The following day, I attended an event organised by Wake-Up Japan and one of Tokyo's ward's local authorities looking to improve the dissemination of information aimed at young people. The event aimed to collect the voice of young people on the matter, and included work with a local artist to find new designs more palatable and efficient for their target audience.

Lastly, I also attended a small gathering organised by Wake Up Japan for their volunteers and partners. Whilst small, I still enjoyed it greatly, and was able to connect with a Seita - a university student volunteer who operates an NPO focused on English education and admissions outreach for Japanese students. I later met him again in Kawasaki to record an interview.

### **Safeguarding Training Session**

This event also took place in Tokyo, however, I thought it to be noteworthy enough to mention separately because of what I learned.

I ran a safeguarding workshop alongside Wake-Up Japan at a Child-Rights Center in Tokyo, where we introduced this concept to a number of university student volunteers. I found it rather interesting, and slightly concerning, that the concept of safeguarding is not very well-known, or developed in Japan. In comparison, the UK has some rather strict laws regarding working with vulnerable people, requiring a DBS certificate (background check), and with most organisations having their own extensive safeguarding protocols. This is not the case in Japan, and is something that needs to be worked on within civil society networks and the legislature.

### **UN University**

Lastly, I was invited to the UN University, to attend an event focused on SDG implementation in Japan. I had the opportunity to listen to and speak with a number of

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people from the Japanese MoFA, members of the Japanese civic youth network, and other organisations, and was greatly impressed with how well developed the SDG framework is in Japan. In the UK, it is rare for people unfamiliar with sustainable development to be aware of the framework, but in Japan, the concept is very well known and many companies use the SDGs as a way of promoting their products and services; I saw the SDG symbols all over the country.

I also met some incredible people, with whom I spent my last day before leaving, and hope to keep in touch both as friends and colleagues.

## Lessons Learned

### Youth Engagement in Civil Society in Japan and the UK

When discussing this subject in Japan, we found some key differences between the way society in general operates in the UK and Japan. These differences were rather neatly demonstrated by the contrast between the 3 duties of Japanese citizens and the 5 British values.



1. お子様を学校へ送り出してください
2. 税金を納める
3. 一生懸命働く



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The 5 British values include: Democracy, Rule of Law, Tolerance of Different Cultures and Religions, Mutual Respect, and Individual Liberty. My personal experience working in youth voice, which is guided by the [Lundy Model of Participation](#) in my local constituency and the UKYP, seemed to reflect these values.

On the other hand, the three Japanese duties are: send your children to school, pay taxes, and work hard. This is a stark difference to what we see in the UK, and poses a number of ontological issues for improving youth participation in Japanese civil society. During my time in Japan, I surveyed a number of young people about their attitudes and understanding of concepts concerning civil society. I have not yet processed all of my evidence, however, my initial outlook is that young people, and especially older students, find it difficult to see themselves as “Shakaijin” - members of society - because they do not contribute to the economy by working, which is seen as a duty for all citizens.

Having had multiple conversations about this subject, the roots of this perspective are likely traced back to the post-war democratisation and demilitarisation of Japan, which led to previous nationalistic sentiments of loyalty and honour being transformed into an intense work ethic that heavily contributed to the Japanese economic “miracle”. However, I concede that I am not yet educated enough on the matter to make any final judgements.

Nevertheless, British civil society is well developed and steeped into the culture and living experience of all Britons. I have not seen this to be the case in Japan.

### **Limitations of Japanese Civil Society**

Japanese civil society, at least in my estimation, is not as well developed as that in the UK or some other highly developed countries. The number of third sector organisations, and especially large organisations, is rather small, and their survival is always in question. OXFAM Japan is one example of a prominent organisation that had to close its operations in the country, due to a number of reasons pertaining to the NGO/NPO environment. The online presence of these organisations is not particularly large due to the low number of employees they often sport, and government support and outreach for independently founded organisations is tough to come across. As such, it is sometimes difficult for people,

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and especially young people who mostly rely on social media and the internet as sources of information on such subjects, to access these organisations. There is also an inequality of access for third sector services in rural areas.

Legislation for youth engagement is also limited. Japan has only recently made tangible progress on creating laws about children's rights, despite having ratified the UNCRC and being an early signatory of the convention; the education system has not yet made much significant progress to reflect this either.

### **Observed Positives of Japanese Civil Society**

Nevertheless, I am positive about the future of Japanese civil society, and especially in regards to young people. The progress that occurred during the last few years has been astounding, and the level of cooperation within Japanese civil society is incredible. I strongly believe that the number of dedicated individuals working on these issues and developing the third sector in Japan will continue to grow. My experiences in Japan taught me that no matter how difficult a task may be, with the right people, anything can be possible. People who are truly dedicated to solving the problems they are facing, and wise enough to educate themselves on these issues and draw inspiration from others, both at home and abroad, are enough to drive progress, even if it is little by little. Furthermore, the young people I worked with in Japan exemplified creativity, and had a strong, positive attitude towards learning new things. I strongly believe that the general societal attitudes of young people in Japan, demonstrated by those I worked with, predispose them to have the capacity to develop a strong base within civil society and create meaningful change for young people in Japan and abroad, provided they are supported by the right people.

I have been fortunate enough to meet such people there, and will never forget my experiences. I hope to remain in touch with many of them, and look forward to following their work from the UK, and visit them in Japan again in the future.