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The struggle for sustainable food standards

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With environmental problems attracting global attention since the 1970s, the IOC has increasingly adopted an ecological rhetoric. In line with recent Olympics, Tokyo 2020 organizers are also advertising a sustainability legacy and have formally committed to contribute to the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Besides financial stability, sustainable energy consumption, and the reusability of new constructions, sustainable food procurement is another important element of the aspirations for a sustainable Olympic legacy. A whole range of interest groups has been struggling to influence these standards before the 2020 Games.

Continuing recent “gastrodiplomacy” endeavors, Tokyo 2020 organizers express ambitions to showcase the excellence of Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) on this occasion in the global limelight.¹ However, there is a considerable gap between the global prominence of Japanese food as soft power and actual food standards. With exports playing only a marginal role in Japanese agriculture, internationally recognized food production and safety standards such as HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points), GLOBALG.A.P. (aka GAP, Good Agricultural Practices), or ISO-based standards remain far from common. The lack in certification is problematic especially for the planned promotion of agricultural and fishery exports.

At the same time, civil society organizations are hoping to make use of the Olympic momentum and have started agenda-setting campaigns. Whether it is whales, ivory, bluefin tuna, or eel, Japan already finds itself under recurring attack from the international community for its handling of natural resources and endangered animal species. Utilizing the increased international attention during the Olympics as a form of foreign pressure (*gaiatsu*), organizations push for more sustainable, environment- and animal-friendly forms of food production in Japan.

Mind the gap – in food production standards

In January 2019, the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (TOCOG) issued its own *Sustainable Sourcing Code*, defining the standards for products and services as well as licensed products.² The central document prescribes safety, ecological, and animal welfare standards for the Games, and lists environmental goals but also social and political aspects such as human rights, working conditions, and business practices. Further details are in the individual codes for core products and services: timber, agricultural products, livestock products, fishery products, paper, and palm oil.

The main priorities in the field of agriculture are food safety, environmental protection, workers' protection, and animal welfare in livestock production. With GAP standards promulgated in the *Code*, a TOCOG representative expects the Tokyo 2020 Games will have a long-term effect especially in the proliferation of GAP certifications and fishery ecolabels. However, GAP certification here does not only include the internationally recognized standards but also Japanese variations.

Even fewer producers are certified in livestock than in agriculture. In order to lower entry barriers for producers before the upcoming Tokyo 2020 Games, a “GAP acquisition challenger” status is additionally awarded to producers who have completed a checklist of GAP conditions, without the requirement to actually comply with all listed items. For fishery products, the *Code* accepts weaker Japanese certification schemes alongside internationally renowned labels such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Further provisions referring to “government-recognized resource management plans” in practice allow the procurement of almost any Japanese product, even from fisheries without effective public resource administration in operation.

Preferential treatment is stipulated for domestic produce in order to reduce long-distance transportation and promote Japanese agriculture, while organic produce as well as production by people with disabilities or “inheriting traditional agricultural systems” is merely recommended. Organic production in Japan is extraordinarily scarce – only around 0.2% of all arable land, compared to 7% in the European Union.³ Provisions for ecological and animal-friendly food procurement do not go much beyond the status-quo in Japan, and the introduction of Japanese versions of international standards does not constitute a substantial reform.

Struggling to change the agenda

For the preparation of the *Code*, TOCOG assembled a working group with representatives from academia, unions, NPOs, CSR professionals, and the

Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Depending on the topic of discussion, they consulted with other professionals such as researchers, a nutritionist, representatives from MAFF and from agricultural and fishery cooperatives as well as consumers' associations. After many heated discussions over almost three years, and a round of public comments on a first draft, the final edition came out in January 2019. Since the last two Summer Olympics in London and Rio de Janeiro already set the bar comparatively high in terms of sustainable food procurement, the Tokyo *Code* is criticized for lowering the existing standards. Yet a TOCOG representative defends the decision not to uphold the same level: "We cannot easily compare London and Tokyo. This is a point I would like you to understand. We had to look at the current situation in Japan and think about what kind of legacy we want to leave behind with this code."

While internationally recognized standards spread to some degree, there is only a weak "recommendation" for organic agriculture. Organic Village Japan is hoping to promote organic agriculture beyond the 2020 Games by serving local organic produce to athletic teams in regional host towns. Other civil society organizations have been working to reform animal-based food production. The Japanese NPO Animal Rights Center (ARCJ) demanded to include animal welfare protection in the *Code* and to maintain at least the standards of the London Olympics. Practices such as gestation crates, forced molting, and battery cages are now forbidden in the EU, but are still used by most producers in Japan. In 2018, together with The Humane League Japan, ARCJ supported the global campaign of some Olympians demanding 100% cage-free eggs and 100% stall-free pork, calling for a boycott of animal products at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games venues otherwise. A few sympathetic parliamentarians are helping to promote the agenda by asking critical questions about animal welfare at the Tokyo Olympics in the Diet. "Many politicians as well as companies are actually thankful to learn about these issues," explains ARCJ's Okada Chihiro, underlining the lack of awareness in the Japanese public and the unfamiliarity of the concept of "animal welfare." She does not consider its appearance in the *Code* a success, as it refers only to very basic private industry management standards. In fact, she considers this tokenistic reference a deception, similar to the introduction of Japanese GAP versions, which falsely seem to suggest the existence of food safety standards on par with international levels.

Similar criticism concerns the recognition of Japanese seafood ecolabels. In an open letter, Greenpeace International condemned the endorsement of weak and inadequate certification schemes: "By doing so, Games organizers will be misleading consumers into believing they are making responsible purchasing decision." Though not reflected in the *Code*, the

Japan Fisheries Association in 2018 submitted a strengthened version of its ecolabel for international benchmarking with the goal of achieving worldwide recognition before the 2020 Games – apparently in response to increasing pressure from environmental groups. This is why Hanaoka Wakao from Tokyo-based consulting firm Seafood Legacy sees a positive impact after all: “When founding Seafood Legacy in 2015, we had Tokyo 2020 as the first big milestone. And I think we are reaching this goal, as many companies are approaching us saying they want to do something in time for the Tokyo Olympics.” Different from the rather confrontational stance of many environmental NGOs, Seafood Legacy works with seafood and retailing businesses to make their supply lines more sustainable and to enhance the Japanese sustainable seafood market: “Business needs to change, they also act as a medium to consumers. And policy will also follow business.”

NGO pressure, however, is crucial, especially if it is international. Seafood Legacy published its criticism of the *Code* along with similar statements by partners from their international network of sustainability groups and companies in an open letter to the TOCOG. Relations are especially close to organizations in the USA. American foundations like the David and Lucile Packard Foundation aim to “lay the groundwork for a sustainable seafood movement” in Japan through generous grants to organizations including Greenpeace Japan, MSC, WWF, Sailors for the Sea, and Seafood Legacy, in “a coordinated effort around the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.”⁴

The ambition to make MSC-certification mandatory in the *Code*, however, was thwarted just like other standards for agriculture and livestock. Pointing out the necessity to source enough food for the Games, the TOCOG representative explains: “For us in the Organizing Committee, it would be great trouble if the procurement standards were too strict and there was not enough material available. We cannot just go for the ideal but have to set standards within an attainable level.”

An Olympic legacy?

Animal rights and sustainable seafood advocates are not satisfied with this argument, insisting an “Olympic legacy” in the sense of stricter standards would have been possible, if there were stronger political will and effort. “I think it is a pity that Japan could not use this opportunity to establish higher standards,” Hanaoka remarks. For some years already, critics have denounced the ubiquitous rhetoric of “sustainable Olympic legacies” in the absence of any significant environmental or even financial stringency as “greenwashing.” Nevertheless, the “rhetorical bandwagon”⁵ of Olympic legacies rolls on, from London and Rio to Tokyo.

Coherent with the controversial framing as “Recovery Olympics,” TOCOG also highlights the Games as an opportunity to “make the utmost use of foods produced in the disaster-stricken areas,” suggesting a return to normalcy after the 2011 nuclear disaster in Fukushima: “Tokyo 2020 will attempt to disseminate accurate information on food safety, put an end to the negative reputation locally produced foodstuffs have endured and communicate the attractiveness of food produced in the affected areas.”⁶ However, even if voicing concern about radioactive contamination of foodstuff remains somewhat taboo, it has substantially shaken Japanese consumers’ trust and highlighted the politically constructed nature of food safety regulations.

Campaigners advocating for stronger environmental and animal rights regulations in Japan pin their hopes on foreign visitors and the expected international media attention. ARCJ has already published a compendium in English entitled *Tokyo animal cruelty* and is likely to continue appealing to foreign audiences before and during the Games. *Gaiatsu*, foreign pressure, is considered an important force in Japanese politics, and Hanaoka is convinced it is also pushing many companies to achieve more aspirational seafood standards in order to avoid foreign media bashing. However, he stresses the importance of applying *gaiatsu* strategically and in coordination with an insider perspective in order to avoid a nationalistic backlash similar to the whaling controversy.

Considering the half-hearted policy concessions and the inertia of official regulations, civil society pressure and business initiatives might indeed be more promising. However, reliance on the private sector comes at a price. Though certainly bringing improvements, market-based certification schemes such as MSC are deeply problematic, none the least due to their inherent business-oriented logic. Similar to retailer-initiated private labels like GLOBALG.A.P., the costly and time-consuming certification process exerts a heavy burden on producers and often excludes small-scale companies. In their agenda setting campaigns, deep-pocketed foundations are promoting specific concepts of sustainability and market-based resource governance, and international hegemonic standards and private labels are exerting considerable power in typically buyer-driven global commodity chains. Ultimately, the contest over food procurement at Tokyo 2020 is played out within the context of global power struggles to define food standards.

Notes

- 1 The Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (TOCOG). 2018. “Tokyo 2020 basic strategy for food & beverage services.” 2018.03. <https://tokyo2020.org/en/games/food/strategy/data/Basic-Strategy-EN.pdf>.

- 2 TOCOG. 2019. "Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic games sustainable sourcing code." (3rd edition). https://tokyo2020.org/en/games/sustainability/data/sus-procurement-code3_EN.pdf.
- 3 Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). 2018. *Heisei 29nendo shokuryō, nōgyō, nōson on dōkō sankō tōkeihyō* [2017 White book on food, agriculture and rural areas, statistical references]. www.maff.go.jp/j/wpaper/w_maff/h29/pdf/sankoutoukei/sankoutoukei.pdf; Eurostat. 2019. "Organic farming statistics." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Organic_farming_statistics. Calculated by projecting 9.956ha under organic cultivation to around 4.5 mill. ha arable land in Japan.
- 4 The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. 2016. "Japan Seafood Market & Fisheries Strategy." May 2016. www.packard.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Japan-Seafood-Market-and-Fisheries-Strategy.pdf.
- 5 Tomlinson, Alan. 2014. "Olympic legacies: Recurrent rhetoric and harsh realities." *Contemporary Social Science* 9(2): 137–158.
- 6 TOCOG. 2018: 26.