



## VSJF ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2024

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# SUSTAINABILITY IN JAPAN

Friday – Sunday, November 15 – 17, 2024

Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB)  
Saargemünder Str. 2, 14195 Berlin

## The Conference

Making human activity on Earth sustainable is currently the greatest challenge of mankind. Ever since the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, the topic has gained world-wide popularity, but what sustainability means, how it can be achieved, how it is politically negotiated, and which actors are involved differs widely across the world. The purpose of this conference is to gain a better understanding of how issues of sustainability are understood, framed and pursued by different actors in Japan. Focusing on economic, societal, and political perspectives, we hope not only to encourage more social science research and teaching related to sustainability issues in Japan, but also to interrogate more widely what sustainability means for the academic profession.

### Organized by:

Harald Conrad *Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (HHU)*

Barbara Holthus *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

Axel Klein *Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST), University Duisburg-Essen*

### Supported by:

Department of Modern Japanese Studies, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (HHU)

German Association for Social Science Research on Japan (VSJF)

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)

Gesellschaft von Freunden und Förderern der Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST), University Duisburg-Essen

Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB)

## Friday, November 15, 2024

13:30 Registration

### 14:00 – 14:30 Welcome and Opening

Harald Conrad *Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (HHU)*

Axel Klein *University Duisburg-Essen*

Barbara Holthus *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

### 14:30 – 16:00 Introductory Address

**Putting corporate social responsibility in context: A comparative perspective on Japan**

Gregory Jackson *Free University Berlin*

16:00 – 16:30 Coffee Break

### 16:30 – 18:30 Panel 1: Business & Economic Perspectives

Chair: Harald Conrad *Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (HHU)*

**Would you like to pay for your greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions? Japan's voluntary approach to carbon pricing**

Franz Waldenberger *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

**Who has the power to shape the discourse? An analysis of institutional change in the Japanese sustainable finance sector**

Ramona Rosalewski *Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf (HHU)*

**Smart, sustainable, profitable? Imaginaries of sustainability in Japanese tech corporations' metaverse initiatives**

Nicole Mueller *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

18:45 – 21:00 Welcome Dinner

**Saturday, November 16, 2024**

**9:00 – 10:30 Keynote Lecture**

**The twisted paths of sustainability: Problems and dilemmas of socio-ecological change**

Sighard Neckel *Universität Hamburg*

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee Break

**11:00 – 13:00 Panel 2: Sustainability and Society**

Chair: Barbara Holthus *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

**Beyond growth: Rethinking Japan's path to environmental sustainability**

Komatsu Hikaru *On-the-Slope, Kyoto (ONLINE)*

**The people as drivers of Japan's green transformation? Dynamics in pro-environmental attitudes and behavior from 1993 to 2020**

Carola Hommerich *Sophia University, Tokyo*

Joanna Kitsnik *Sophia University, Tokyo*

**Redefining rural life: Discussing sustainability in Japan's countryside in times of population decline**

Sebastian Polak-Rottmann *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

13:00 – 14:30 Lunch

**14:30 – 16:30 VSJF-Fachgruppen / VSJF Section Meetings**

16:30 – 17:00 Coffee Break

**17:00 – 19:00 General Meeting of the VSJF**

**Sunday, November 17, 2024**

**09:30 – 10:30 Panel 3: Sustainability at Osaka 2025**

Chair: Axel Klein *University Duisburg-Essen*

**The German Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan – a sustainable manifesto**

Christopher Hecker *German Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan*

**Everything everywhere all at once: Chasing SDG themes at the 2025 Osaka Kansai Expo**

Isaac Gagné *German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ Tokyo)*

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee Break

**11:00 – 12:30 Panel 4: Political Perspectives**

Chair: Axel Klein *University Duisburg-Essen*

**Decarbonizing Japan: The prospect of its green transformation (GX) policy**

Ohta Hiroshi *Waseda University, Tokyo (ONLINE)*

**Crowdfunding for sustainability? The intersection between the “hometown tax” program and community-level self-governance in rural Japan**

Hanno Jentsch *University of Vienna*

**12:30 – 13:00 Concluding Remarks**

# Abstracts

## Introductory Address

### Putting corporate social responsibility in context: A comparative perspective on Japan

Gregory Jackson

Japan is known for its stakeholder model of corporate governance and practice of lifetime employment, which differs from the shareholder value model of USA or UK. Less well understood is how Japanese corporate governance has shaped the development of corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR has emerged as a ubiquitous new form of private governance worldwide, through which corporations seek to address social and environmental concerns. The presentation compares the adoption of CSR policies by Japanese firms in comparison to listed corporations in OECD countries. The analysis shows that the CSR adoption in Japan lags behind other OECD countries, but has also caused relatively low levels of controversies in relation to environmental and social issues. The talk will explore the development of CSR as a governance model in Japan, and the tensions these imply for business practice.

**Gregory Jackson** is Professor of Employment Relations at Free University Berlin. His research examines how corporate governance is influenced by diverse organizational and institutional contexts. His research utilizes cross-national comparison to better understand the regulatory and other societal influences on the corporation. His research aims to link disparate fields of scholarship, including institutional theory, organizational analysis, economic sociology, and comparative political economy. His research has been published widely in leading international journals in business studies, sociology, and political science, utilizing internationally a range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. He has been principal investigator on grants from the German Science Foundation (DFG), European Union FP7 program, and ERSC, as well as the Department of Trade and Industry (UK), Bertelsmann Foundation, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (Japan), the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales, and the Hans-Boeckler Foundation. His research has received mention in *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, and *BBC radio*. He is an editor of *British Journal of Industrial Relations* and served as Chief Editor of *Socio-Economic Review* from 2012-2021.

## Panel 1: Business & Economic Perspectives

### Would you like to pay for your greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions? Japan's voluntary approach to carbon pricing

Franz Waldenberger

In 2020, the Japanese government announced the ambitious goal to fully decarbonize its economy by 2050. Many experts agree that this can only be achieved by either steadily increasing taxes on GHG emissions so that they become unaffordable and/or by introducing an emissions trading scheme which steadily reduces the volume of allowed emissions to zero. However, the Japanese government has so far imposed only a marginal carbon tax rate and refrained from introducing a compulsory trading system. Its reliance on voluntary schemes resembles its approach in combating the COVID-19 pandemic and resonates with John O. Haley's analysis in his 1996 book *Authority Without Power*. The presentation will argue that these similarities can be at best partially substantiated, pointing to the strong industrial policy traits of Japan's green transition (GX) strategy. It will conclude with an outlook on whether and how Japan's approach will be able to achieve the country's net-zero goals.

Professor Dr. **Franz Waldenberger** has been Director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo since October 2014. He is on leave from Munich University where he holds a professorship for Japanese Economy. His research focuses on the Japanese Economy, Corporate Governance and International Management. He is editor in chief of the international peer reviewed journal *Contemporary Japan*. His recent publications include *The Future of Financial Systems in the Digital Age* (2022, co-edited with M. Heckel) and *Alterung und Pflege als kommunale Aufgabe* (2022, co-edited with G. Naegele, Hiroko Kudo and Tomoo Matsuda). As member of the Japanese German Forum and the board of the Japanese German Business Association, he has for many years been working for the betterment of German Japanese relations.

## **Who has the power to shape the discourse? An analysis of institutional change in the Japanese sustainable finance sector**

Ramona Rosalewski

The financial sector's responsibility in addressing global challenges has gained increasing attention, particularly due to the substantial investments needed to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Japan has also seen a growing emphasis on sustainable practices within its financial sector. However, unlike the European Union, which promotes sustainable investments through regulations and a sustainable finance taxonomy, Japan is focusing on recommendation guidelines and soft policies to align with global initiatives like the SDGs. These different approaches can be explained by theories such as Hall and Soskice's (2001) *Varieties of Capitalism*, which argue that each country's specific institutional complementarities shape how new concepts are implemented. Accordingly, this paper explores first the institutional pre-conditions, particularly in corporate governance, that influence the development of sustainable practices in the Japanese financial sector and explores then the agents behind the processes of this institutionalisation. Specifically, the paper investigates the following questions: Which institutional arrangements influence the development of sustainable finance in Japan? Who are the (collective) institutional actors within the organizational field of Japanese sustainable finance? What institutional work strategies (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006) and patterns of action do these actors employ? To answer these questions, the paper applies Reiner Keller's *The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse* (2004, 2011) to analyse patterns in primary data, including government publications, private sector materials, and news articles. This analysis will illustrate the strategies used by actors and the formation of discursive alliances. Additionally, 19 qualitative semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the Japanese sustainable finance ecosystem will be used to contextualize the discourse material.

**Ramona Rosalewski** is a PhD candidate and research associate at the Department of Modern Japanese Studies at the Heinrich-Heine-University Düsseldorf. She completed her Bachelor's degree in Modern East Asian Studies, focusing on Japanese and Economics, followed by a consecutive Master's programme in the same field at the University of Duisburg-Essen. From November 2022 to March 2023, she was a visiting scholar at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo, supported by a DAAD doctoral scholarship. Her research interests focus on institutional change and sustainable development in the economic sector, particularly in the context of Japan. The focus of her dissertation project is the sustainable finance sector in Japan. She examines the field through the lens of discourses and institutions.



## Smart, sustainable, profitable? Imaginaries of sustainability in Japanese tech corporations' metaverse initiatives

Nicole Mueller

Japanese metaverse initiatives rely heavily on visions of a forthcoming 'weak' metaverse: Whereas a fully immersive 'strong' metaverse, as Paul Roquet argues, implies an "embodied escape" to alternate fictional worlds, the 'weak' metaverse is a permeable mesh of physical reality and digital overlays in direct continuation of concepts such as smart city, internet of things (IoT), and digital twins. One striking example of this trend is the digitally mapped Osaka World Expo's Yumeshima Site which is enriched in Extended Reality (XR) with easily accessible digital content. But will this 'weak' metaverse, given its intertwinement with our physical environment, address the same sustainability issues that the latter inevitably faces? Or does it merely reframe the escapist tendencies of the 'strong' metaverse for a different audience? Addressing these questions, imaginaries of sustainability as a potentially subversive sister concept of Sheila Jasanoff's sociotechnical imaginaries are discussed with regard to Japanese tech corporations' visions of a 'weak' metaverse. Smart cities in particular, as a model space for this 'weak' metaverse, imply efforts toward a more sustainable (urban) future through the reduction of emissions and through gathering and modeling huge amounts of analytical data. However, apart from obvious privacy concerns, this approach – put forward especially by mobile hardware companies and network providers – tends to define sustainability in the purely "smart", technological terms of a modernization imaginary. Against this backdrop, Japanese tech corporations' imaginaries of a 'weak' metaverse and implied references to different types of sustainability are analyzed based on digital corpora of corporate press releases and related news coverage. The findings, as well as the question whether a potentially sustainable 'weak' metaverse might serve the purpose of intentional distinction from the escapist 'strong' metaverse, are also discussed with reference to interviews with experts from Japan's corporate XR scene.

**Nicole Marion Mueller** is a Senior Research Fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo, where her postdoctoral research focuses on the digital transformation of contemporary Japanese society. Her main research interests include culturally shaped narratives and their connection to sociotechnical imaginaries, i.e., the significance of fictional storytelling for technological innovation and marketing, which she examines with particular regard to emerging technologies of Extended Reality and to Japanese tech corporations' Sci-Fi prototyping initiatives. This is rooted in a more general fascination with the connections and interactions between literature, culture and society, as well as with the potentials of digital humanities- and mixed methods-based approaches for the analysis of such interactions. One result of this is her PhD project, a digitally augmented comparative analysis of Japanese Thomas Mann retranslations and the complex interactions between different translation strategies and various historical contexts, which has been published (open access) with J.B. Metzler in 2024.

## Keynote Lecture

### The twisted paths of sustainability: Problems and dilemmas of socio-ecological change

Sighard Neckel

Since the concept of sustainability became widespread at the end of the 1980s, it has been used as a response to the ecological crisis, which today is documented above all in climate change and species extinction. However, sustainability refers to very different socio-political goals. Modernization, transformation and control are three development paths that modern societies take when they strive to establish principles of sustainability in economics, politics and the culture of everyday life. Ecological modernization aims to enable green growth through technological innovation and economic incentives. In contrast, ideas of socio-ecological transformation are based on overcoming growth imperatives and destructive nature relations, which puts the need for far-reaching institutional changes on the political agenda. Control strategies of sustainability relate to authoritative measures in an ecological state of emergency that segregates risks, challenges democratic processes and attempts to technologically intervene into the earth system. All of these sustainability development paths are associated with problems and dilemmas that may ultimately run counter to their respective intentions. Socio-ecological transformations are not immune to paving the way for control regimes. Green capitalism can be an impediment on the path to ecological change. Outsourcing and segregation of ecological risks may have opposite effects. The lecture will analyze some of these dilemmas and discuss possible routes out of the pitfalls of socio-ecological change.

**Sighard Neckel** is Professor of Sociology at Universität Hamburg and Senior Permanent Fellow of the DFG Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies “Futures of Sustainability”. He previously held professorships in Gießen, Vienna and Frankfurt am Main, where he had also been a board member of the Institute for Social Research. Visiting professorships and fellowships, among others, at the University of Tokyo, Macquarie University Sydney and Seoul National University. Research areas: Economic sociology, social inequality, emotion research and conflicts on sustainability. Latest book publications: *Kapitalismus und Nachhaltigkeit* (2022); *Gesellschaftstheorie im Anthropozän* (2020); *Die globale Finanzklasse* (2018); *Die Gesellschaft der Nachhaltigkeit* (2018).

## Panel 2: Sustainability and Society

### Beyond growth: Rethinking Japan's path to environmental sustainability

Komatsu Hikaru

East Asian countries, including Japan, are often perceived as trailing behind European nations like Germany in terms of environmental sustainability. The Environmental Performance Index ranks Germany third and Japan 27th, with climate protests common in Germany but rare in Japan and other East Asian countries. However, it may come as a surprise that Japan's Ecological and Material Footprints are actually lower than those of Germany. Furthermore, Japan has reduced its environmental impacts at a rate comparable to or even faster than Germany. These observations suggest that Japan provides valuable lessons in environmental sustainability, despite the lower Index rank. Japan's success in reducing environmental impacts can be partly attributed to its stagnant economic growth since the 1990s. Notably, this economic stagnation has not resulted in a long-term decline in the subjective well-being of its population. How has this been achieved? How have Japanese adapted to such economic conditions? These questions are crucial for skeptics of degrowth, despite degrowth being theoretically considered an effective means of achieving environmental sustainability. By analyzing long-term trends in household income, subjective wellbeing, and Ecological Footprint, among other factors, I aim to present Japan as a case for "rethinking" the global path to environmental sustainability.

**Komatsu Hikaru**, PhD, is a dedicated environmental sustainability advocate, currently working for On-the-Slope (坂ノ途中; [www.on-the-slope.com/](http://www.on-the-slope.com/)), Kyoto, a social venture focused on promoting sustainable farming and consumption in Japan. The organization supports young, small-scale farmers, aiding them in maintaining their livelihoods through sustainable agricultural practices. Hikaru's passion for environmental issues began in his teenage years. He pursued natural science, specializing in hydrology and ecology, at the University of Tokyo and worked for major academic institutions such as the University of Tokyo and Kyushu University. During his scientific studies, Hikaru realized the significant role of culture in tackling environmental sustainability challenges. This insight led him to transition from natural science to the humanities, where he investigated the interplay between culture and environmental sustainability at Kyoto University and National Taiwan University. Beyond academia, Hikaru has contributed to education policy through advisory roles at the World Bank and UNESCO. Currently, he is engaged in promoting a cultural shift towards viewing humans as an integral part of nature by selling sustainably produced vegetables. His recent publications include "Is happiness possible in a degrowth society?" (*Futures*, 2022), "Education and environmental sustainability" (*Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, 2023), and "School food, sustainability, and interdependence" (*Oxford Review of Education*, 2024). The paper "Education and environmental sustainability" was honored with the Outstanding Paper award at the 2024 Emerald Literati Awards.

## The people as drivers of Japan's green transformation? Dynamics in pro-environmental attitudes and behavior from 1993 to 2020

Carola Hommerich & Joanna Kitsnik

Given the growing challenge of meeting the 1.5 degrees Celsius target outlined in the Paris Agreement, climate scientists are urging rapid and substantial action to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis. The role of institutional and governmental policies in combating climate change is crucial, yet their success hinges on public compliance and support. The willingness of people to adhere to these policies or to modify their individual habits directly impacts the possibilities and effectiveness of climate protection measures. Therefore, comprehending how individuals perceive climate change, and identifying the circumstances under which these perceptions influence behavior, is a vital component for mobilizing a collective shift towards environmentally sustainable societies. Using survey data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Environment module for Japan spanning the years 1993, 2000, 2010, and 2020, we discuss how the perception and reaction to environmental issues and climate change has evolved over the past three decades in Japan and identify the primary trends. Our analysis centers on pro-environmental attitudes, willingness to make sacrifices to protect the environment, environmental self-efficacy, and beliefs in external solutions to the climate crisis (deriving from technological progress and economic growth), as well as pro-environmental behavior. We explore how these aspects vary among diverse social groups and identify the role of sociodemographic characteristics in the translation of pro-environmental attitudes into action. With our analysis, we aim to shed light on the intricate relationship between individual attitudes, societal trends, and policy effectiveness in the context of climate change, ultimately providing insights that could guide future strategies for fostering a more environmentally sustainable society in Japan.

**Carola Hommerich** is Professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Human Sciences, Sophia University, Tokyo. In the past, she has served as Associate Professor of Sociology at the Graduate School of Letters of Hokkaido University, and as Senior Research Fellow at the DIJ Tokyo. Her research focuses on the interrelation of subjective well-being and social status, as well as on the interlinkage of environmental attitudes and behaviour. Recent publications include *Sustainable Societies in a Fragile World. Perspectives from Germany and Japan* (Sophia Univ. Press, 2024, ed. with Masato Kimura) and "Perceived Social Exclusion Partially Accounts for Social Status Effects on SWB: A Comparative Study of Japan, Germany, and the US" (*Applied Research in Quality of Life*, 2024, with Christina Sagioglou).

**Joanna Kitsnik** is a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) funded postdoctoral researcher at Sophia Univ., Tokyo. She holds a PhD in Sociology (2022) from the Graduate School of Letters, Kyoto University. In her research, she focuses on comparative aspects of attitudes towards wealth and income inequality, environmental attitudes, and sustainability. Recent publications include "A Revolution in Consciousness? Changes in Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours in Germany and Japan" (*Sustainable Societies in a Fragile World. Perspectives from Germany and Japan*, Sophia Univ. Press, 2024, with Carola Hommerich) and "Why We Don't Mind the Gap: The Robust Role of Individual Beliefs in Enduring Unequal Income Distribution—Evidence from 34 Countries" (*Comparative Sociology* 22(4): 589-630, 2023).

## **Redefining rural life: Discussing sustainability in Japan's countryside in times of population decline**

Sebastian Polak-Rottmann

Discourses on sustainability frequently address questions on a broad scale – national, supra-national or even global – in order to evaluate sustainable ways of production, living, consumption or distribution. This talk, however, sheds light on areas and communities of a smaller scale that are associated with declining production and consumption. Rural Japan faces a dilemma in terms of sustainability. Due to a continuous decline in population and a growing share of older people among the remaining residents, many areas struggle to sustain their population and standard of living. Revitalisation measures often include attracting more tourists to the region which is not necessarily linked to ideas of sustainability. On the other hand, frequently occurring natural hazards and a strong national discourse on the SDGs might lead to higher awareness towards sustainability. Against this backdrop, how can we understand rural sustainability in Japan? In this talk, I take a closer look at the lived experiences of local people and how their practices contribute to sustainability. Based on fieldwork in three rural areas in Japan, I discuss three aspects of sustainability in rural areas in Japan, covering sustainable production, resilience and sustainable lifestyles. Despite a challenging economic and demographic outlook in these regions, I was able to detect several local approaches that include both innovative and older community practices. I demonstrate how a diverse set of local actors create small places of social exchange that promote ideas of sustainability. While the approaches differ in content, locality and structure, they resemble in creating awareness for the importance of local natural resources and in offering ways to use them sustainably. Although still small in size, these approaches illustrate “rural” ways of dealing with discourses on sustainability and create alternative perspectives to the narratives of decline and growth in rural Japan.

**Sebastian Polak-Rottmann** is senior research fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo. He focuses on the resilience of local communities in three areas in rural Japan. Specifically, he analyses “places of resilience” that local residents design to enable social exchange in declining areas. He received his PhD in 2022 (Vienna) on the well-being and political participation in the Aso region in Southern Japan. His recent publications include *Wie politische Partizipation Freude bereiten kann: Sechs Dimensionen des subjektiven Wohlbefindens politisch handelnder Personen im ländlichen Japan*. (Iudicium, 2024) and *Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (together with Antonia Miserka; Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna, 2023).

## Panel 3: Sustainability at Osaka 2025

### The German Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan – a sustainable manifesto

Christopher Hecker

The German Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, which was commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, has dedicated its presence to the theme of circular economy. Circularity is the terminological culmination of the sustainability discussion. It is the fulcrum that enables sustainable economies to leverage the holistic closing of material cycles. The primary objective of a circular economy is one with zero waste in which all consumable goods are returned into the cycle and whose consumption of resources is radically minimised. With a view to the German Pavilion, it is all based on the notion of circularity or – translated into design terms – on the shape of a circle: the pavilion itself, the visitor experience, the design, the technologies, and future visions presented all assume this form. In consideration of SDGs 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), the pavilion's immersive exhibition will focus on a sustainable life in the future.

**Christopher Hecker** is Pavilion Director of the German Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka. For two years he has been leading the Koelnmesse Expo team, actively shaping the realisation of Germany's participation. As a recognised expert on Japan, he has extensive knowledge of and experience with the country and its culture.

## Everything everywhere all at once: Chasing SDG themes at the 2025 Osaka Kansai Expo

Isaac Gagné

What does the World Expo mean in the 21st century? And what does it mean for Japan in 2025? This presentation will look briefly into some possible meanings of the 2025 Osaka / Kansai Expo, with a focus on how some of the most visible key terms, SDGs and Sustainability, are being used by the Expo organizers and sponsors. Based on an analysis of the Expo 2025 website and available PDF documents, including its 62-page “Sustainability Action Plan”, as well as an examination of promotional websites for national, domestic, and corporate pavilions, theme weeks, co-creation challenges, and corporate sponsor’s websites, I investigate the ways that SDGs and Sustainability more broadly is invoked and described to advertise the Expo. My preliminary analysis reveals at least 52 official and semi-official themes, subthemes, concepts, and goals in the Expo material, of which the terms “Life”, “Future”, and “Nature” figure most prominently. However, the sheer number of themes and subthemes, and the loose ways that various terms are used, risks turning the Expo narrative into a word salad that says everything and nothing at once. In other words, the grand proclamations by Expo organizers and corporate sponsors may be all sound and fury, signifying nothing; however, I suggest that the very fact that these themes have become global touchstones for corporate and national self-promotion implies that we may be witnessing a heightened international awareness about Sustainability, and mega-events like World Expos may be important testing grounds for what concepts “stick” in the global arena. Hence, I offer some thoughts on the implications that such narratives have for the discourse of Sustainability in Japan, and for the meaning of Sustainability in the contemporary age of global capitalism and national branding.

**Isaac Gagné** is a Principal Researcher at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) and Managing Editor of the DIJ’s interdisciplinary journal, *Contemporary Japan*. He received his PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Yale University and has worked at Waseda University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and The University of Hong Kong. His research interests include theories of moral economy, religious globalization, social welfare, community-based mental healthcare, and the cultural industries. He co-edited *Japan through the lens of the Tokyo Olympics* (Routledge, 2020), and his work has been published in the edited volume *Rethinking Locality in Japan* (Routledge, 2022), as well as in *Transcultural Psychiatry*, *Japan Review*, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *Intersections*, and others.

## Panel 4: Political Perspectives

### Decarbonizing Japan: The prospect of its green transformation (GX) policy

Ohta Hiroshi

Japan has seemingly caught up with European countries and other frontrunner countries in a climate change mitigation and decarbonization race by setting an ambitious greenhouse gas reduction target and carbon-neutrality policy under the Suga administration in the runup to the UN climate conference (COP21) in 2021. The subsequent Kishida administration launched the Green Transformation (GX) policy to articulate Japan's net-zero carbon neutrality policy further. However, when we scrutinize the GX policy, we find discrepancies between it and the decarbonization objective. The author demonstrates this inconsistency by comparing GX core policy items and desirable policies to pursue decarbonization, especially shedding light on Japan's renewable energy policy and renewable energy's potential. Japan is abundant in renewable energy sources, such as solar, wind, and geothermal, and among them, wind power is a relatively untapped natural energy. So, the author pays extra attention to the status of wind power development and a way to accelerate it. Finally, he briefly analyzes why Japan is still a laggard in renewable energy development even though it can simultaneously mitigate climate change and energy insecurity and reduce energy costs.

**Ohta Hiroshi** is Professor Emeritus of Waseda University and the Director General of the Ocean Governance Institute, which specializes in global environmental politics, international relations, and Japan's foreign policy. Professor Ohta holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Department of Political Science of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Columbia University. He has recently edited the *Handbook of Japan's Environmental Law, Policy, and Politics* (forthcoming from MHM Limited). Other works include "Politics of Climate Change and Energy Policy in Japan: Is Green Transformation Likely?" in *Earth System Governance* (2023), "The Analysis of Japan's Energy and Climate Policy from the Aspect of Anticipatory Governance" (*Energies*, 2020), and *Comparative Politics: The Environmental and Energy Policies of Major States* (in Japanese) (2016).



## **Crowdfunding for sustainability? The intersection between the “hometown tax” program and community-level self-governance in rural Japan**

Hanno Jentsch

This paper analyzes the emerging link between two recent policy trends for “regional revitalization” in Japan: the *furusato nōzei* (“Hometown Tax”) program and “regional management organizations” (RMO, *chiiki unei soshiki*). RMO are civic self-governance bodies in which residents devise and implement plans to sustain their local living environment, especially in the rural peripheries of amalgamated municipalities. Since the central government began to promote RMO in 2015, their number increased rapidly. Other than traditional local self-governance organizations (i.e., neighborhood associations), RMO are expected to generate income from their operations. In practice, however, most RMO heavily depend on government subsidies, and report a lack of funding. In this context, *furusato nōzei* donations emerge as an additional source of income for RMO. The *furusato nōzei* program is a unique form of redistribution, which allows citizens to redirect a certain amount of their tax burden to a locality of their choice, typically in exchange for “thank-you gifts”. Based on field research in several locations (interviews, document collection) and the analysis of policy documents, the paper shows how RMO enter the market for *furusato nōzei* donations, and how local governments moderate these efforts. I argue that the emerging link between the *furusato nōzei* program and the promotion of RMO shifts the responsibilities for sustaining rural livelihoods towards civil society on two dimensions: RMO are expected to supplement service provision in rural peripheries from which the local state retreated in the mid-2000s merger wave – and to do so, they increasingly appeal for extra-local funding from urban citizens. As local governments are heavily involved in this process, and the *furusato nōzei* program is a government-administered form of “civic crowdfunding”, the emerging link also reproduces the notoriously blurry boundaries between civil society organizations and the state in Japan.

**Hanno Jentsch** is an Assistant Professor for Politics of Japan at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna. His research interests include social and regional inequalities in Japan, the political economy of rural revitalization, the Japanese welfare regime, decentralization, and local governance. His first monograph *Harvesting State Support* (University of Toronto Press, 2021) analyzed institutional change and local agency in Japan’s agriculture. His current research project focuses on changing state-society relations in rural Japan.