

# An Analysis of WWOOF Activities in Japan: Facilitating New Social Development

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This paper has analysed data on WWOOF in Japan, and shown how WWOOF activities in Japan have the potential to and are facilitating new social development. This new social development is fourfold. First, in opportunities for new organic food produce markets. Second, that it is social development with a nationwide reach. Third, that it constitutes bottom-up social development, thereby requiring no cost to or dependence on government. Forth, that it constitutes reciprocated voluntary support between disparate groups of people, including that between rural and urban populations of all age groups, involving no monetary exchange.

**Key words:** nationwide bottom-up social development, non-monetary exchange, new organic food markets

## 1. Introduction

‘WWOOF’ stands for World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF Greece [49]). This paper is an analysis of WWOOF in Japan, and the bases upon which it has the potential to and is facilitating new social development. After providing a general background to WWOOF, the functioning of the WWOOF system in Japan is outlined. The paper goes on to articulate two case studies of WWOOF in Japan, and their significance to social development. The paper closes by outlining new development that can and is deriving from WWOOF activities in Japan. There are three central aspects in support of the thesis that WWOOF in Japan constitutes new social development. First, that it has a nationwide reach. Second, that it is bottom-up, consequently requiring no cost to or dependence on government, therefore better facilitating people to learn to create social development by themselves for themselves. And third, that it drives reciprocated voluntary support between peoples with disparate resources and circumstances including that between urban and rural populations of all age groups.

A three-part literature review is as follows. First, of English-language literature relating to WWOOF. McIntosh and Campbell (p. 111 [20]) researched WWOOF farms in New Zealand concerning their contribution to tourism. Lipman and Murphy (pp. 84, 90 [17]) said that WWOOF drove engagement with local communities. Mosedale (p. 203 [25]) argued the importance of the exchange relationship in the WWOOF system. Jamieson (pp. 11, 237 [12]) highlighted the opportunities for learning that WWOOF facilitates. McIntosh (p. 263 [18]) outlined WWOOF in terms of its non-monetary exchange for mutual cooperation. McIntosh’s and Bonnermann’s (p. 82 [19]) research found that people involved in WWOOF tended to have rural and organic experiences.

Second, of Japanese-language literature relating to WWOOF. Tatemoto (p. 57 [42]) wrote of WWOOF

facilitating school children’s learning about food and healthy lifestyles. Nakamura et. al (p. 425 [26]) considered WWOOF for volunteering through tourism.

Third, of five activities that can be misunderstood to be the same as WWOOF, followed by explanations as to why they are different. Hayashi (p. 12 [8]) researched urban-rural development in Japan, focusing on activities in Hokkaido and Kyushu. Motani (p. 18 [22]; p. 262 [23]) did research in relation to un-interconnected local communities. Asada (p. 14 [1]) wrote on activities to establish shared urban housing. Suzumura’s (p. 12 [41]) and Onishi’s (p. 58 [30]) work was indicative of many Japanese-language publications on government facilitating urban-rural interaction (Yamada, p. 13 [54]; Somu-sho [39]). Finally, Shiomi (p. 18 [38]), and the publication *NOSAI* ([28]), outlined businesses that introduce urban people to rural circumstances including that to do paid work.

It will be demonstrated in this paper, that the activities articulated in these five pieces of research respectively differ from WWOOF in Japan for the following reasons. The first two are confined to local regions, compared to WWOOF being nationwide. The third concerns primarily urban-based development, compared to WWOOF that combines urban and rural. The forth is research into government programs that are top-down, compared to WWOOF that is bottom-up. An analysis of bottom-up vis-à-vis top-down development is provided in section 5. The fifth concerns urban people going to do paid work on farms, compared to WWOOF that facilitates non-monetary cooperation between urban and rural peoples. Collectively, these differences support the thesis that WWOOF in Japan is facilitating new social development.

There has been no research done into WWOOF activities in Japan, and the significance of those activities to social development. This paper will contribute to filling that research gap.

## 2. A history of and background to WWOOF

The concept of ‘WWOOF’ originated in the early 1970s in Britain. Since then, WWOOF organizations have established themselves in approximately fifty countries (WWOOF South Africa [53]). Because

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national WWOOF organizations are autonomous, the norms associated with each can differ. Most WWOOF organizations are overwhelmingly organic food related. There is no head office of international authority relating to WWOOF (WWOOF International [50]).

The WWOOF system consists of two groups of members: Hosts and WWOOFers. Hosts have a farm or other situation at which they can provide WWOOFers with a place to sleep, three meals a day, and mutually supportive engagement amongst the people at their place. WWOOFers go to stay at a Host's place. The Host provides WWOOFers with a means to participate in the activities done at the their place, that the WWOOFer is happy to do in return for receiving a place to sleep, meals and friendship. Hosts and WWOOFers pay an annual membership fee to their national WWOOF organization, an indication of which is 8,500 yen for Hosts, and 5,500 yen for WWOOFers (WWOOF Japan [51]).

**Table 1. The number of Hosts involved in organic farming**

The degree to which Hosts were involved in organic foods	Number of Hosts	Percentage
100% organic	139	46.5%
70% to 90% organic	91	30.4%
50% organic	34	11.4%
A small part organic	26	8.7%
Intending to become involved in organic foods	3	1.0%
Unstated	4	1.3%
Other	2	0.7%
Total	299	100.0%

Note: Source WWOOF Japan(2012).

WWOOF is a non-monetary exchange between Hosts and WWOOFers (Greenman, p. 23 [7]). WWOOFers are neither guests nor workers, but a part of the Host's place – just as family, neighbors and other friends are. Based on the activities WWOOFers see at the Host's place, WWOOFers identify what they can do to participate and learn as they do so. The Host reciprocates by taking an interest in the WWOOFer's aspirations (WWOOF Estonia [48]). Seen through Sandel's (pp. 5-6 [36]) work, this nationwide non-monetary exchange is a progressive form of social development. WWOOF in Japan facilitates the inclusion of people of all ages.

Hosts specify the times of year that they want to receive WWOOFers, what activities they have for WWOOFers to participate in, and what knowledge they are interested in obtaining from WWOOFers. WWOOFers choose a Host, and contact that Host to ask questions: for example, whether they are able to learn about a particular activity at the Host's place. The Host responds likewise, asking the WWOOFer about issues important to the Host. WWOOFers can arrange to stay at a Host's place for a few days, to many months. WWOOFers often move from one Host to

another, thereby visiting numerous Hosts nationwide: at WWOOF Japan, from Hokkaido to Okinawa (WWOOF Australia [51]).

### 3. Some analysis of WWOOF in Japan

The two tables provided show three sets of data on WWOOF Japan: WWOOFer and Host numbers from 2002 to 2012, and the number of Hosts that were involved in organic farming in 2012. The criterion for organic farming was no current use of artificial substances. These data have been chosen on the basis that they are fundamental to analyses of WWOOF Japan. The majority of WWOOF Japan Hosts are involved in organic farming (WWOOF Japan [51]).

Table 2 shows the number of WWOOF Japan WWOOFers and Hosts from 2002 to 2012. The drop in WWOOFers in 2011 resulted from the March 11 disaster in northeastern Japan. The overall growth in Host and WWOOFer numbers demonstrates that WWOOF in Japan is growing. WWOOFer numbers being approximately ten times that of Hosts, derives from a relatively limited number of establishments that are able to become Hosts, compared to a greater pool of people in the general population who are able to become WWOOFers (WWOOF Japan [51]).

At November 2012, of four hundred nineteen WWOOF Japan Hosts, two hundred ninety-nine – or 71.4% – were involved to some extent in agriculture and food related industries. Table 1 shows the extent to which those Hosts involved in agriculture and food related industries were organic (WWOOF Japan [51]).

### 4. Two case studies

The following two case studies were selected as per the following. A geographical area of Japan where five Hosts were situated was selected on the basis that interviews had not been previously done there. The Host and WWOOFer case studies derive from interviews conducted at two different Hosts. The activities highlighted in both the Host and WWOOFer case studies were found to exist to some degree relating to all five Host and WWOOFer interviews, demonstrating that the case studies were at least to some extent indicative of activities being undertaken by Hosts and WWOOFers in general. The Host and WWOOFers chosen for the case studies were selected because they represented good cases of WWOOF activities in Japan.

That the interviews were not part of a broader sample of interviews leaves their selection open to criticism that they may not be statistically representative. This is a shortcoming of the data used in this research.

#### 1) Host

The following is a case study of a WWOOF Japan Host. This Host has been chosen because it represents a situation in which new social development realized at a formerly stagnant farming business was much a consequence of WWOOF. As is stated below, if the

owner had not taken advantage of WWOOF, the farming land would likely have been abandoned.

**Table 2. The number of WWOOFer and Host**

year	WWOOFer(1)	Host(2)	(1)/(2)
2002	150	20	7.5
2003	450	50	9.0
2004	800	90	8.9
2005	1,300	170	7.6
2006	1,800	230	7.8
2007	2,100	290	7.2
2008	2,600	330	7.9
2009	3,100	360	8.6
2010	3,700	380	9.7
2011	2,900	400	7.3
2012	3,100	419	7.4

Note:Source WWOOF Japan(2012).

The farm owner was in his sixties, and the farm was much disused – typical of many disused farmlands in Japan (Yamamoto and Nakatani, p. 71 [55]). The owner negotiated for a young WWOOFer to take over the management of the farm in return for an equity stake in it. The young man determined that the best strategy for the farm was to become organic, and to become a WWOOF Japan Host.

Significant here is the bringing together in cooperation of people with different needs and resources via the WWOOF system. The young man had the skills to coordinate WWOOFers in participation in farm activities, and to have them learn and enjoy as they did so. The farm owner did not. The young man lacked resources to acquire control of a farm. The farmer had those resources. Hence, each person needed the other in order to realize new social development.

Some of the activities that attracted WWOOFers to the Host included organic farming, rejuvenating soils with composted food waste and keeping free-range chickens. When interviewed, there were eight WWOOFers at the Host, the majority of whom were from cities.

WWOOFers are invited to stay for a day in order to see if they are suited to the Host's place. WWOOFers participate in activities at the Host for about six hours a day, six days a week. WWOOFers are regularly taken on outings to local places of interest. Some WWOOFers stay for many months. The Host accepts about sixty WWOOFers each year.

Taking advantage of laws requiring institutions such as company canteens to dry and dispose of their food waste, the farm obtains dried food waste at no cost, as the disposing institution would otherwise have to pay to have it incinerated. There were dormant fields on the farm, the soils in which needed rejuvenation. The Host had learned that dried food waste had to be mixed with other nutrients in order to rejuvenate soils, and was therefore seeking WWOOFers with that

knowledge. This Host was a good example of having WWOOFers fully participate, and in spending time with the WWOOFers in return, thus creating good Host – WWOOFer reciprocity (WWOOF Japan [51]).

## 2) WWOOFers

The following is a case study of two WWOOF Japan WWOOFers. These two WWOOFers have been chosen because they constitute a good example of people using WWOOF towards realizing new social development. The two were using WWOOF as an inexpensive means to visit farms, meet people, learn skills, and identify new social development opportunities. Hereafter the two WWOOFers will be referred to as WWOOFer One, and WWOOFer Two.

The two WWOOFers were interviewed while visiting a Host. Both had lived in cities. WWOOFer One was employed as a salaryman but felt job insecurity. WWOOFer Two wanted to begin a business in organic foods. The Host that the two WWOOFers were visiting was interested in a business venture with the two WWOOFers (WWOOF Japan [51]).

## 5. Deriving from WWOOF, some ramifications for agriculture and society in Japan

Social development is defined as activity of a sufficient critical mass demonstrated by a substantial degree of nationwide involvement including that associated with new economic activity, new livelihoods, and new education, in addition to making it easy for people to move to different locations in order to realize the same, involving rural and urban populations of all age groups (Bullock and Trombley, p. 803 [4]; Audi, p. 744 [2]). It is argued in this paper, that WWOOF in Japan with more than 400 Hosts nationwide and more than 3,000 WWOOFers a year fits these criteria and thereby constitutes new social development in Japan.

The following are analyses of two means by which new social development coheres around WWOOF in Japan. The first relates to new economic opportunities in organic food markets. As stated above, organic farming is central to WWOOF in Japan. Organic food industries constitute a sector for growth. The total area of the world being utilized for organic agriculture grew from eleven million hectares in 1999, to thirty-five million hectares in 2008 (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, pp. 184-5 [31]). During the last decade, organic-certified foods have been one of the fastest growing sectors in the global food industry (Lockie et. al, p. 135 [16]).

Developed countries such as Japan struggle to compete in mainstream agricultural sectors against developing countries such as China with their cheaper cost-of-labour inputs. Morgan and Murdoch (pp. 271-2 [24]) show that organic produce has become part of global food-supply chains, much in competition with mainstream agriculture. From the 1980s, organic foods have increasingly become available in supermarkets including those in Japan, and those markets continue to grow. Organic foods tend to obtain a price premium,

and a higher profit margin for growers, compared to non-organic foods (Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, pp. 184, 190 [33]). These circumstances represent new economic opportunity to Japanese farmers.

WWOOF Japan Hosts are ideally situated to take advantage of both domestic and export markets for organic products (Holmgren, p. 168 [9]). That small-scale farming tends to be most suited to high-end organic produce gives further advantage to WWOOF Japan Hosts, as WWOOF Hosts in Japan and in most other countries tend to be small-scale family or cooperative farming enterprises (Meave [21]).

China is and will increasingly be a major importer of food (Villoria, p. 531 [44]). China has environmental problems in some areas to an extent that groundwater is unsafe for use on crops (Yiwei [56]; Wan, p. 3715 [45]; Li, pp. 14-5 [14]). Some Chinese consumers consequently seek foods from developed-world countries where food safety regulations are said to be more rigorous – including those at a premium cost to Chinese alternatives (Doctoroff [5]; Quince and Phillips [33]). The Chinese market therefore represents an enormous potential export market for Japanese organic produce.

The second way in which WWOOF in Japan constitutes new social development, is its nationwide bottom-up agency. Bottom-up development is defined as that created by people for themselves, without government dependence – thus implicitly tending to systemically facilitate its active participants' agency to realize sustainable social development outcomes through their own initiatives – that cannot therefore be arbitrarily rescinded (Pekkanen, pp. 2-3 [32]). This is significant, because nationwide social development in Post-WWII Japan has been overwhelmingly top-down, usually involving government control and concomitant dependence, usually incurring costs to the public purse, and implicitly tending to systemically limit the agency of its passive recipients to learn to create and sustain social development by and for themselves (Hook, pp. 3-5 [10]; Scheiner, pp. 3-4 [37]; Nakane, p. 49 [27]). Ogawa (p. 12 [29] and Pekkanen (p. 3 [34]) see this in terms of a lack of non-government controlled civil society in Japan. Eisenstadt (p. 178 [6]) accounts for a proclivity for top-down development to derive from Japan's Confucian roots (Watanabe, p. 364 [46]).

As this bottom-up – top-down distinction is central to this paper, the following theoretical analysis is provided in further support of it. Power resides at the top of society, on the basis that it is used to influence people – including when challenged in the form of physical force – to behave in ways that those holding and administering that power want them to behave (Rawls, p. 7 [34]). Power resides with government, on the basis that government legislates to itself a monopoly on the use of physical force (Zinn, p. 39 [58]). Thus government exists inextricably at the top of society, and development it undertakes is consequently top-down (Sampson, p. 140 [35]). Bottom-up development conversely does not rely on power

external to itself. Bottom-up development is driven by influence generated by the integrity of its internal logic.

The nationwide and bottom-up nature of WWOOF in Japan constitutes a mechanism by which people with disparate resources and needs – Hosts and WWOOFers – can learn to help themselves through their own endeavor to manage social change (Lipman and Murphy, pp. 90-1 [15]). It is widely acknowledged, that associated with Japan's two-decade long recession, are many phenomena, for example: acceleration of farmland abandonment, rising unemployment, and increasing mal-distributions of wealth especially between city and rural, and younger and older peoples (Matsutani, pp. 1, 18, 121 [17]; Yuji, pp. 1-4 [57]; Berger, p. 76 [3]; The Japan News, p. 10 [43]). This has culminated in social malaise for some peoples in some parts of Japan, especially in rural areas (Hutchison, Ito and Westermann, p. 2 [11]; Yamamoto and Nakatani, p. 71 [59]).

The afore-outlined case studies are examples of exchanges that are taking place amongst Hosts and WWOOFers, leading to new social development in Japan, notwithstanding recession and social malaise (Sugimoto, pp. 282-3 [40]; Johnson, p. 320 [13]; Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld, p. 188 [33]). The barriers to entry are low. For the annual membership fee, Hosts and WWOOFers can make arrangements of an unlimited frequency and duration, including WWOOFers' biggest expenses of accommodation and meals. WWOOF in Japan is differentiated from other activities because it: is nationwide, involves urban and rural peoples of all ages, is bottom-up, and is a non-monetary exchange.

A shortcoming relating to the thesis that WWOOF in Japan is facilitating new social development, is that the WWOOF system in Japan does not explicitly require respectively reaching and measuring stipulated social development goals and outcomes. Consequently, there is a risk that at least some WWOOF activities may constitute to some extent unrealized expectations of new social development, rather than in fact such genuine outcomes.

It follows, that there may be some WWOOFers who take advantage of Hosts, and Hosts who take advantage of WWOOFers, by seeking to accumulate as much as possible to themselves while reciprocating as little as possible to the other. Manifestations of the former were said to be WWOOFers refusing to participate fully in activities at Hosts' places. Of the latter, Hosts refusing to spend time in genuine reciprocation with WWOOFers (WWOOF Japan [52]).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that WWOOF in Japan can and is facilitating new social development, key attributes of which have been stated as: nationwide, bottom-up, and facilitating collaboration between disparate groups including urban and rural peoples of all ages for no monetary exchange. A history of WWOOF and its association with organic farming has



been outlined, as has an account of the functioning of the WWOOF system in Japan. Data on Host and WWOOFer numbers, and the percentage of Hosts that are involved in organic foods have been provided, in addition to two case studies. Opportunities in the growth of organic food markets, and problems associated with social malaise in Japan have been stated, in addition to the means by which WWOOF activities notwithstanding have the potential to and are facilitating new social development. On the basis that social development in Japan has historically been top-down, central to new social development associated with WWOOF is that it is bottom-up. The systemic merit of bottom-up compared to top-down development has been emphasized. It has been shown that Host and WWOOFer numbers are increasing, indicating that WWOOF is growing in Japan. This growth – in concert with the Host case study – is demonstrative of new social development outcomes in association with WWOOF being realized in Japan, thus supporting this paper's central argument.

Shortcomings of this research have been stated twofold. First, that some of the data used was chosen from a narrow sample, thus leaving the research open to criticism that it may not be statistically representative. Second, that because the WWOOF system in Japan does not necessitate reaching and measuring stipulated social development goals and outcomes, there is a risk that some activities may be to some extent as much about unrealized expectations of new social development, as in fact such genuine outcomes.

Future research could aim to provide more comprehensive analyses of WWOOF activities in Japan, and their contribution to social development.

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