

# Japanese Movements on Children's Participation and Child-friendly City

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JAPAN CELEBRATED the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 2014. However, the rights of children are still not secured enough in Japanese society. There are still old-fashioned ideas of conservative people that hinder the implementation of the CRC in the society. One reason might be the image of the word “right” that is translated into Japanese language as “kenri,” and misunderstood as promoting a claim to private right. It is also translated as “jinken,” which literally means human rights. Thus, the children’s right to participation in CRC articles 12 and 13 has not been appreciated much in Japanese society, except in several municipalities. The Child Friendly Cities (CFC) program of UNICEF requires children’s participation as its first building block. Therefore, it may be worth to promote CFC without using the words “kenri,” with the children themselves participating by showing their abilities and subjectivities to adults in their real living world. There may be various approaches to promoting children’s participation, but an appropriate way suited to Japanese culture and society is needed.

## Movements for Child-friendly City

The establishment of child-friendly cities in Japan took place through the initiatives of the local governments. These local government initiatives fall generally under three streams; a fourth stream involves the citizens.

The first is the movement to establish the legal framework mainly in the form of child rights ordinance. The number of local governments deliberating on the enactment of child rights ordinance increased during the 2000s. As of December 2014, forty local governments in Japan have enacted ordinances on the rights of the child. See Annex A for the list of cities with child rights ordinances. These ordinances are named either as “Child Rights Ordinance” or “Child Ordinance,” with the latter avoiding the word “Rights” due to the problem of acceptance of the idea of claiming “rights.” Regardless

of name, however, the contents of these ordinances do not differ much from each other. Aside from these basic ordinances, many local governments enacted ordinances focusing on specific issues such as prevention of child abuse, child rearing, sound development of children, etc.

These ordinances correspond to the second building block, the legal framework block, of the nine building blocks of the Child-friendly City (CFC).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, those municipalities have likely satisfied one of the nine conditions of CFC.

The General Research Institute of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC Institute) in Japan, established by law professors Akito Kita, Shigeto Aramaki, etc., led and supported the advocacy for these legal framework enactments. Kawasaki city enacted such ordinance in 2000, the first local government in Japan to do so. This development was reported to UNICEF Innocenti Center in Florence, Italy and introduced on the website of the CFC.

The second stream is the movement of local governments to promote the participation of children in local governance and community development. This movement is in line with the national policy on decentralization to support rural development and local self-governance. This policy led to the promotion of local autonomy and community development. The local governments included in their decentralization efforts the idea of participation of youth and children in programs related to sustainable development. They promoted the basic idea that children have the right to participate in matters that affect their future. This is likewise based on citizenship education that supports proactive participation of children in local governance and in the management of their immediate environment.

The third stream is the movement to promote the active participation of children at the latter stage of the Action Plan for the Support for Raising the Next Generation under the “Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising the Next-Generation of Children.” This act was originally conceived as a measure to address the falling birthrate. But this original plan was criticized for considering only the viewpoints of adults in terms of parental leave from work and childcare, and not the voice of the children themselves. Several movements of local governments worked to incorporate the participation of children in the latter stage of implementation of the Action Plan.<sup>2</sup>

The different backgrounds of these local government efforts determined the streams of local government movements supporting CFC.

But there is another stream at the local level that can be categorized as the fourth type: the citizens' movement. It can be said that this movement developed from the movement of parents on children's play and cultural activities. This is especially the case of the children's theater or family theater movements that started in 1960s. The movements spread all over the country and were subsequently organized as a network. This network is known as *Kodomo Gekijo* (Theater) or *Oyako* (Parents and Children) *Gekijo* Network at prefectural and national levels. The underlying idea of the movements was to enrich the creative expression of children and to increase their sensitivity while promoting children's theater. These movements were concerned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the promotion of the children's right to participation. Also, these movements played a great role in the rapid rise of the civic movement that campaigned for the enactment of child rights ordinances. This fourth stream should be appreciated as playing a part in different dimensions across the three other streams of local government movements.

### Advanced Cases

Aside from the case of Kawasaki city, the following two cases illustrate how the second and third streams took place.

#### 1) Niseko Town, Hokkaido prefecture

The Niseko town experience is a typical model of the second stream. Niseko town is the pioneer municipality in enacting an ordinance on local autonomy among the municipalities in Japan. The Niseko Town *Machizukuri* [District Enhancement] Basic Ordinance was enacted in 2000. Its Article 11 states:<sup>3</sup>

The rights for citizens under the age of twenty years to participate in *Machizukuri*.

The Town Council gives the right to participation in suitable *Machizukuri* projects to Minors and children under 20 years of age.

In 2002, two years after the enactment of this ordinance, Niseko town set up *Machizukuri* (town planning) committees for primary school and lower secondary school students respectively. The students, ten students in each committee, came from schools that were willing to participate in the work

of the committees. The students talked about town issues including the situation surrounding them, drafted proposals, and took the challenge of realizing some of their proposals. Besides the Children's *Machizukuri* Committee, a "Children's Parliament" was established composed of ten children selected through a public selection process. The "Children's Parliament" is like an ordinary town council. The "Children's Parliament" discussed and agreed to request the town officials in a dialogue to support the implementation of the proposals presented by the "Children's *Machizukuri* Committee." Any problem raised at the "Children's Parliament" on the children's proposals is discussed at the "Children's *Machizukuri* Committee" to resolve the problem and study proposals. The children worked on many kinds of projects, such as wall painting at the bridge of railway station, making billboard to stop illegal dumping of waste, setting up view spots of a beautiful scenery to preserve the landscape, etc. A former staff of the Niseko local government for children's participation, Mr. Tohru Saito, recalled the participation of children in the committee as follows:

Those children who took part in the *Machizukuri* Committee acted by themselves in self-driven manner, and enjoyed different experiences. Thanks to activities that demonstrated their expertise as "children," it looked like our town is becoming a better town. In addition, by engaging in public relations, the sight of the children increased the awareness of the town folks on child rights. Their [children] hard work on *Machizukuri* Committee has become a stimulus to the adults [the general public and local government officials].

The Town Mayor, Mr. Ken Katayama, is very active in supporting the CFC program. Based on the achievement of the decade-long children's participation program, Niseko town should satisfy the condition of the first CFC building block. The provision on children's participation in the *Machizukuri* basic ordinance relates to the legal framework requirement. While there has not been any real monitoring system or Ombudsman for child rights, people in the town say that the mayor has been taking a lead in this role, and the town is considering such an external monitoring system in the near future.

## 2) Chiba City

The second case is the Chiba city in Chiba prefecture, near Tokyo. This is a typical case of the third stream. Chiba city is the place where the



Children in Niseko Town study renewable energy and make a micro-hydraulic power model using plastic bottles<sup>4</sup>



View spot selected by children in Niseko town. (Photo by Isami Kinoshita)

first Asian Pacific Regional Conference of Child Friendly Cities was held in 2009.<sup>5</sup> To prepare for this conference, Chiba city collaborated with this author and the Association for Children's Environments (ACE) to promote children's participation. At that time, the city was drafting the action plan for the latter period for implementing the "Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation of Children." The local officials, therefore, advocated the inclusion of a statement on children's participation in the action plan. The Asian Pacific regional conference was held in a venue the city built as the center for children to gather. The place named QiBall (Children's, Science and Business Center) has studio, meeting rooms, sports hall, library and day care center together with a science museum. QiBall has a management committee composed of children. The children who were using music studio composed the theme song of the CFC and ACE based on regional conference theme "Children's Power – Power to the Children" and sung the song at the conference. Ms Karen Malone, the chairperson of the Child Friendly Asia Pacific Network, and Mr Ray Lorenzo, the director of ABCitta and the urban planner facilitating children's participation in urban design mainly in Italy, attended the conference.



Children singing their theme song "Power to the Children" in Chiba City (Photo by Isami Kinoshita)

After the conference, Chiba city was very eager to promote children's participation and started various participatory programs such as "Children's Power Workshop," "Children's Power Forum," "Exploring City Official Works," "Lunch Meeting with the Mayor," "Mini City CBT-Children's Play Town," "Children's University," "Children's Café," etc.



Children's Forum with Japan's youngest mayor talking with the kids. (Photo by Ryuichi Matsushima)

Issues regarding children such as child abuse, street safety, child-friendly hospital, etc., are discussed and selected as research agendas in the workshops, with five to six sessions being held per topic. After the discussions, the children give a report at the Children's Power Forum and talk with the mayor and local government officials in charge of the issues. "Exploring the Work of City Official" provides children the opportunity to visit the city officials' working place and know how the city is managing different projects. And after the tour, they have a lunch meeting with the mayor and the responsible officials. By frankly talking with the mayor, the children express their impressions, questions and ideas. Through this process, some ideas are realized such as adoption of a character mascot in the image of a microorganism drawn by children when they explored sewage disposal plant.





Children's Exploring City Public Work Projects and Lunch Meeting with the Mayor in Chiba City. (Photo by Ryuichi Matsushima)



“Children's Play Town” is the big role-play of a mini city managed only by children, based on the experience of Mini Munich. Children in Munich would assume roles as city officials and mayor. Sometimes the child mayor of the mini city would attend some city events together with the real city mayor.<sup>6</sup>

“Children's Parliament” was previously too much of a type of tokenism, but from this movement it was improved to become a real children's participatory process to express their opinion to the real government of Chiba city.



Children's Parliament in session. (Photo by Ryuichi Matsushima)

“Children's Café” supports children who have no place to go after school and on weekends. Chiba city started the trial opening of the “Children's Café” at an empty room at a community center. The café opens every weekend at a site that have many social issues such as the mixed area of foreign immigrants, social housing area for the lower class, and the condominium of rich families that has no management body in charge. This experiment made it clear that there were many children who needed this kind of place where they could stay and talk with staff members because there was no place for them to have human contact in case they have any communication problem at school and at home. Chiba city is now thinking of extending the children's café program to other areas in collaboration with non-profit organizations for children.

Chiba city has not yet adopted a legal framework on child rights under the CFC building blocks system. But it pursues the idea of experiencing collaboration with children first and then enacting legal framework later based on what is really needed according to experience. This may be a unique approach and its legal framework may turn out to be an original one, very different from those in the other municipal ordinances on the rights of the child.

### **Education on Child Rights**

Human rights are taught from primary school level in Japan. They are introduced in relation to issues of bullying, abuse, and physical punishment. The human rights being taught are, however, limited to preventing bullying, abuse and physical punishment. The students are neither taught about the right to participation (articles 12 and 13 of the CRC) nor the right to play. There are not so many schools that have been introducing CRC in their school education program. Compared with other countries that support child rights education in the school curriculums by providing educational tool kits, the Japanese schools are not so active in teaching the CRC. Even the reports of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs state that they publicize the CRC by just introducing it in their websites.<sup>7</sup>

However, there are some advanced local governments that teach CRC in schools. In Shimane prefecture, the prefectural Board of Education made a handbook on CRC for primary and secondary (lower and upper) levels.<sup>8</sup> Some schools in Tokachi region in Hokkaido prefecture promote children's participation in their schools based on articles 12 and 13 of the CRC.<sup>9</sup>

### **General Observations**

There is still a kind of allergy among conservative people in Japan to the word "kenri" as a translation of the word "right," and thus they react negatively against it and causes them to misunderstand child rights as giving children the freedom to claim an egoistic idea. But the word "jinken" as a direct translation of human rights is commonly accepted in school education. The education on CRC in the school system and society has actually been delayed by this linguistic issue. As a social background on its history,

the Japanese society exists as a group society, not as a society consisting of individuals. Therefore, the misunderstanding brought by the negative reaction to the word “kenri” has not been solved. This means that there is still not enough understanding of human rights. It also means that the Japanese society is not yet a mature civil society. Nowadays, there is a growing tendency toward a high consumption society that causes people to live a closed, individual life with no concern for social matters. This in turn breeds bureaucracy, on one hand, and an inhuman economic system that controls people's life, on the other hand. To find another direction to create a more humane society and a sustainable democratic society, human rights education should be introduced more in the education system as a base for developing a democratic and peaceful society.

The Child Friendly Cities Program, which promotes children's participation as shown in the case studies in some municipalities, is a very important and useful program that creates such an ideal civil society with citizens as subjects expressing their sovereign power. The children's participation program has been changing the mind of adults who met the active children. Adults tend to act more authentically when facing children, which might bring the society to the direction of an ideal future, hopefully a sustainable future. Being child-friendly means being friendly to all.

## **Endnotes**

1. According to *Building a Child Friendly Cities - A Framework for Action*, the process of building a Child Friendly City “is synonymous with implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in a local governance setting. The nine elements include:

- a. Children's participation: promoting children's active involvement in issues that affect them; listening to their views and taking them into consideration in decision-making processes;
- b. A child friendly legal framework: ensuring legislation, regulatory frameworks and procedures which consistently promote and protect the rights of all children;
- c. A city-wide Children's Rights Strategy: developing a detailed, comprehensive strategy or agenda for building a Child Friendly City, based on the Convention;
- d. A Children's Rights Unit or coordinating mechanism: developing permanent structures in local government to ensure priority consideration of children's perspective;
- e. Child impact assessment and evaluation: ensuring that there is a systematic process to assess the impact of law, policy and practice on children - in advance, during and after implementation;

- f. A children's budget: ensuring adequate resource commitment and budget analysis for children;
- g. A regular State of the City's Children Report: ensuring sufficient monitoring and data collection on the state of children and their rights;
- h. Making children's rights known: ensuring awareness of children's rights among adults and children;
- i. Independent advocacy for children: supporting non-governmental organisations and developing independent human rights institutions - children's ombudspersons or commissioners for children - to promote children's rights."

UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre and International Secretariat for Child Friendly Cities, *Building a Child Friendly Cities - A Framework for Action* (Florence: 2004), page 4.

2. Additional information about this is as follows: "The Act on Raising the Next Generation had a limited term and was to expire in 2015, but the 2014 amendment extended the term for ten years. (Act on Raising the Next Generation, Act No. 120 of 2003, Supplemental Provisions, art. 2, amended by Act No. 28 of 2014.) The original Act obliges employers with 101 or more employees to formulate action plans to achieve employees' work-family (child-rearing) balance. Business owners must notify the Equal Employment Office of the Labor Bureau of the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW) about these measures and make them publicly available. (Id., Article 12.) The 2014 amendment of the Act adds a provision related to publicizing model companies that have implemented good measures. When a company is approved as a model company, the company releases information on its action plan and statistics, but will be exempted from the requirement to notify the MHLW. (Id., art. 15-2.) The MHLW has a website [[www.ryouritsu.jp/bno2.html](http://www.ryouritsu.jp/bno2.html) - in Japanese language] that introduces action plans for the achievement of a work-family balance (last visited June 23, 2014)."

Source: Law Library of Congress, 24 June 2014, [www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc\\_news?disp3\\_l205404042\\_text](http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc_news?disp3_l205404042_text).

3. For the full text of the ordinance, see [www.town.niseko.lg.jp/machitsukuri/jyourei/images/kihon19.pdf](http://www.town.niseko.lg.jp/machitsukuri/jyourei/images/kihon19.pdf).

4. Photos by Niseko town government, [www.town.niseko.lg.jp/machitsukuri/jyourei/kodomo.html#anco7](http://www.town.niseko.lg.jp/machitsukuri/jyourei/kodomo.html#anco7).

5. For more information about the conference, please visit the website of the Child-friendly Asia-Pacific, [www.childfriendlyasiapacific.net/](http://www.childfriendlyasiapacific.net/).

6. For more information on Mini Munich, please visit [www.mini-muenchen.info](http://www.mini-muenchen.info).

7. Ministry of Foreign Affairs & MEXT, *The White Report about Human Right Education and Publicity* 2014, [www.moj.go.jp/content/000124193.pdf](http://www.moj.go.jp/content/000124193.pdf).

8. For primary schools: [www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/kyoikusido/index.data/25kenri-shou.pdf](http://www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/kyoikusido/index.data/25kenri-shou.pdf). For secondary (lower and upper) schools: [www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/kyoikusido/index.data/25kenri-chu.pdf](http://www.pref.shimane.lg.jp/kyoikusido/index.data/25kenri-chu.pdf).

9. Haruo Sawada, Akito Kita, Shinnya Wada and Arato Shigemaki, *Creating School with Children – The Wind of CRC from Tokachi, Hokkaido* (Tokyo: Nihon Hyoron Publishing Company, 2006) (in Japanese).

**Annex A****Cities with Child Rights Ordinances in Japan**

City	Ordinance
1. Kawasaki city, Kanagawa prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - December 2000
2. Naie-cho, Hokkaido prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2002
3. Tajimi city, Gifu prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - September 2003
4. Meguro-ku, Tokyo	Child Ordinance - November 2005
5. Memuro-cho, Hokkaido prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - 2006
6. Uozu city, Toyama prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2006
7. Toshima-ku, Tokyo	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2006
8. Gifu city, Gifu prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2006
9. Nabari city, Mie prefecture	Child Ordinance - March 2006
10. Hakusan, Ishikawa prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - December 2006
11. Shime-cho, Fukuoka prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - December 2006
12. Imizu, Toyama prefecture	Child Ordinance - June 2007
13. Toyota city, Aichi prefecture	Child Ordinance - October 2007
14. Joetsu city, Niigata prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2008
15. Nagoya-shi, Aichi prefecture	Child Ordinance - March 2008
16. Hino city, Tokyo	Child Ordinance – June 2008
17. Sapporo city, Hokkaido prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - November 2008
18. Chikuzen-cho, Fukuoka prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance – December 2008
19. Iwakura city, Aichi prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance – December 2008
20. Koganei city, Tokyo	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2009
21. Ishinomaki city, Miyagi prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2009
22. Tono city, Iwate prefecture	Child Ordinance - March 2009
23. Nisshin city, Aichi prefecture	Children Creating Future Ordinance - March 2009

24. Chikushino city, Fukuoka prefecture	Child Ordinance - March 2010
25. Makubetsu town, Hokkaido	Child Rights Ordinance - April 2010
26. Kota town, Aichi prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - December 2010
27. Uchinada town, Ishikawa prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - December 2011
28. Oushu city, Iwate prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - January 2012
29. Munakata city, Fukuoka prefecture	Child Ordinance - March 2013
30. Kitahiroshima city, Hokkaido prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - June 2012
31. Chiryu city, Aichi prefecture	Child Ordinance - September 2012
32. Sennan city, Osaka prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - October 2012
33. Setagaya ward, Tokyo	Amendment of Child Ordinance - December 2012
34. Aomori city, Aomori prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - December 2012
35. Shibetsu city, Hokkaido prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - February 2013
36. Nikko city, Tochigi prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2013
37. Matsumoto city, Nagano prefecture	Child Rights Ordinance - March 2013
38. Chita city, Aichi prefecture	Child Ordinance - March 2013
39. Nagano prefecture	Child Support for the Future Ordinance - July 2014
40. Nara city, Nara prefecture	Child Friendly City Ordinance - December 2014

Source: General Research Institute on the Convention on the Rights of the Child;  
 List of Local Governments with Child Rights Ordinances  
[http://homepage2.nifty.com/npo\\_crc/siryoun/siryoun\\_jyorei.htm](http://homepage2.nifty.com/npo_crc/siryoun/siryoun_jyorei.htm)