

Will Japan's volunteer sector change and develop an attractive image through the Tokyo Olympics?

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In the Tokyo Olympics, a total of about 90,000 volunteers will be mobilized, with roughly 80,000 volunteers for event management and more than 10,000 volunteers for tourist and transportation guidance.ⁱ There has never been such a large volunteer mobilization in the history of the Olympics, and this will be a valuable opportunity to enhance Japan's volunteer culture. In this article, the author reviews some aspects of the London and Rio de Janeiro Olympics, and discusses the kinds of volunteer legacies that Japan could create through the Tokyo Olympics.

Volunteer legacies created in the London Olympics

In the 2012 London Olympics, 70,000 volunteers were mobilized for event management. The managers of the London Olympics meticulously prepared for specific legacies, and made plans in advance to provide volunteers with continuing opportunities even after the Olympics. The database of Olympic volunteers, who were called Games Makers, was afterward renamed Team London and put under the management of the London city government.

According to a 2016 report,ⁱⁱ 135,000 people have been registered as volunteers in London, and their integration into more than 1,600 organizations has been coordinated through the Team London website (<https://volunteerteam.london.gov.uk/>).

A further London volunteer legacy lies in the provision of opportunities for disabled persons to work as volunteers. Based on the idea that the opportunity for volunteer activity should be open to all people, support volunteers were additionally deployed to help the disabled participate in volunteer work, ensuring that anyone could be a volunteer.

The need for 70,000 volunteers was fully exploited to substantially increase the number of volunteers nation-wide. According to government statistics,ⁱⁱⁱ the percentage of UK residents who volunteered in 2012-2013 increased rapidly to 64%, from 57% in 2010-2011 before the Olympics. This suggests that the volunteer legacies of the London Olympics have yielded definitive results.

Difficulties in volunteer management experienced in Rio



Source of photo: Photo by Jeff J Mitchell/Getty Images

The London approach was adopted in Rio, where wheelchair volunteers were seen at Olympic venues, and adaptation of the Olympic volunteer database for continued use is being discussed.

However, Rio faced some difficulties in comparison with London, where a volunteer culture was already in place. Except in the case of religious activity, the concept of voluntary work was not well established in Brazil, and there was initial concern as to whether enough people would be found to satisfy the large need for volunteers.

The most significant issue arose after the beginning of the Olympics. Of the 50,000 who had registered as volunteers, roughly 15,000 either did not show up at their assigned Olympic venues or quit their jobs over the course of the event.^{iv} Notably, the media reported that many of the applicants were only interested in the uniforms supplied. Moreover, there appeared to be some management issues; among them, the significance of volunteering was not well communicated to the citizens, and specific duties and staffing arrangements were not announced until just before the Olympics. Needless to say, when planning to create a volunteer legacy, it is necessary to take the social environment and volunteer culture of the host area into consideration.

Despite such difficulties in Rio, most volunteers seemed to enjoy the experience of contributing to the Olympics. The Rio Olympics have just ended, and it may take some time for concrete results to emerge. Volunteers who have gained valuable experience will

likely be involved in various activities, such as sports events, in the future.

Senior volunteer participation in the Tokyo Olympics

Let us consider, then, some volunteer legacies expected to emerge from the Tokyo Olympics. As in London and Rio, it is necessary for Tokyo to plan for continued use of the volunteer database after the Olympics, and to create an environment where disabled people can participate. Beyond this, however, we can expect the creation of legacies with characteristics reflecting Japan's current situation; and here we find two key elements: senior volunteers and pro bono volunteers.

In Japan, where the birth rate is declining and the population is aging, the labor force population is decreasing year by year. While this phenomenon is often perceived pessimistically, there is a positive side in that the number of potential senior volunteers with skills and free time is increasing. There were many senior volunteers actively working at the venues of the London and Rio Olympics, and even more senior volunteers are expected to be active in the Tokyo Olympics. And such volunteers, after gaining valuable experience, will be an important force in supporting the civil society of Japan, whose labor force population continues to decline.

Promotion of pro bono volunteering with professional skills

In addition to senior volunteers, a significant number of pro bono volunteers are expected to emerge. Pro bono volunteering is a type of volunteer activity that employs professional skills. It originally designated a provision of service by professionals and specialists, free of charge, using their available time to contribute to the public good. Recently in Japan, there has been an increase in such activities, including the provision of specialized services by consulting firms to NPOs and NGOs that address social issues.

Such pro bono efforts may spread widely as a result of the Tokyo Olympics. Volunteering in Japan is typically imagined as doing something that can be done by anyone, such as picking up litter, free of charge. According to a survey by the Japan National Council for Social Welfare,^v the two most common volunteer activities, for example, are "communication and play, such as chatting, playing games and performing plays" (14.9%), and "management of organizations and groups, and planning of events and projects" (11.3%), neither of which typically involves pro bono work.

Pro bono-type activities are, of course, very valuable. And if the expertise and skills of volunteers can be utilized, the resolution of social issues will be enhanced and the volunteers themselves will gain a deep sense of fulfillment. Specialized skills are, in fact, often required at Olympic management sites. While volunteer jobs such as guiding crowds at venues are well known, there are actually many other volunteer jobs, which require professional skills, such as game referees, interpreters for interviewing athletes, and rescue workers. Highlighting such jobs may change the image of volunteer work.

Can we change the image of volunteer work?

The key to generating volunteer legacies is to revamp the traditional image of volunteers.

As volunteering is often understood by the Japanese to imply service and charity, there remains a prevailing impression of 'serving at your own expense'. Having been ordered to pick up litter at school without understanding the significance of the act, many young people have the impression that voluntary work is compulsory and boring.

Volunteers in stylish uniforms playing an active role at Olympic venues have the potential to transform such traditional notions into something attractive and pleasant. Among the many possible volunteer activities, none attracts more public attention than volunteering for the Olympics. Our capacity to exploit the valuable experience of the projected 90,000 Tokyo Olympic volunteers depends on management's preliminary preparation for the relevant, and distinctly Japanese, legacies expected to emerge from the event.

i "Volunteers" on the website of the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games

<https://tokyo2020.jp/jp/get-involved/volunteer/>

ii Team London Impact Report, 10 February 2016

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/volunteering/team-london-impact-report>

iii Community Life Survey by Cabinet Office

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey>

iv Thousands of Olympic volunteers quit over 'long hours and lack of food'

<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/rio-2016-thousands-of-olympic-volunteers-quit-over-long-hours-and-lack-of-food-a7194776.html>

v "Investigation Report on the State of Volunteer Activities" by the Japan National Council for Social Welfare, 2014

http://www.shakyo.or.jp/research/20140808_09volunteer.pdf

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