

Social Innovation between Marginality and Affluence: A Case Study on “Food Banks” in Japan

Freie Universität Berlin Nadine Vogel

1. Aim

Social innovation has become a buzzword in recent years. The term refers to civil society organizations that develop business strategies (such as street newspapers sold by the homeless) and to new ideas and approaches that instigate market dynamics or commodities (such as microcredit banking schemes that provide unsecured credit to the poor). However, although social innovation is nowadays at the center of an academic discourse on how it may help solving social problems, literature on social innovation in Japan has yet been quite limited. In contrast to the surge of popularity in the US and European academia, there is few academic research investigating social innovation in Japan in detail. This study aims at contributing to this new and diverse research field. It examines how social innovation develops by presenting the case of a food assistance initiative that was successfully adopted in many high-income countries but became confronted with severe obstacles as it spread to Japan. The initiative involves the recovering of “edible but not sellable” food from manufacturers, distributors and retailers and the distribution of the food to people with low income – a social aid concept that seems easy to replicate in many locations at first sight. Eventually the “food bank”- system became adopted in Japan, too. However, it took the initiators many years to overcome various institutional constraints stemming from corporate culture, (dis-) trust in civil society and the regulatory environment.

2. Data & Methods

The presentation is based on a qualitative field study. Data collection was carried out based on participant observation and 42 guideline-based interviews conducted with food banks activists, private companies, corporate donors inside Japan’s food industry, and civil society organizations in Japan.

3. Results

The study finds that most food assistance initiatives share the same organizational concept: they collaborate with a variety of local partners ranging from civil society, municipal governments and private companies, and they aim at rapidly transforming the initial mission-driven grassroots initiatives into professionalized social enterprises. However, the case study also shows how institutional constraints (such as social structure, level of civic engagement, giving behavior, etc.) can counteract diffusion processes.

4. Conclusion

From the findings, the presentation challenges the assumption that social innovation simply need to be replicated to be successful. Rather, the case study shows that social innovation is highly dependent on the individual strategies of “change agents” (Rogers 2003) who are customizing the social innovation according to new institutional environments.

References

Rogers, Everett M. (2003): Diffusion of Innovations Fifth Edition. New York: Free Press.