

# Japan Report

## Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024

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## Executive Summary

### Democratic government

Despite problems such as the malapportionment of constituencies, hereditary parliamentarism and clientelist practices, Japan remains one of the most advanced and stable democracies in both East Asia and the industrialized world. There are no substantial problems with respect to fundamental civil rights, such as freedom of press, assembly and association, and the current government is noticeably less willing to challenge democratic standards than some previous governments.

Nevertheless, the Supreme Court tends to be lenient toward the government and the administrative organs' discretionary powers remain strong in terms of the disclosure of documents or detention of suspects. Japan's civil society exerts influence on political decisions only in the field of economic and labor policy, with organizations such as the Japanese Business Federation (Keidanren) enjoying privileged access to and close connections with the government. Social welfare and environmental NGOs are not as visible in policymaking and deliberations as in other countries.

Despite some progress in fighting corruption, collusive ties exist between politicians, businesspersons and bureaucrats. The transparency of decision-making is weakened further by the fact that, due to the dominant position of the Liberal Democratic Party, legislative projects are negotiated primarily within the party, while the Diet rarely performs its deliberative, oversight and investigative functions.

### Governing with foresight

As a result of institutional reforms implemented since 2001, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Cabinet Office are well-equipped to conduct top-down policy coordination. Japan boasts a highly professional civil service, but the ministerial bureaucracy is characterized by strong sectionalism, and is insufficiently trained in strategic foresight and anticipatory innovation. Due to the limited effectiveness of formal interministerial coordination, informal channels continue to center around the ruling party. As a large share of provisions are earmarked for state grants, local authorities remain largely

dependent on the central government. Even though the Kishida government has intensified contacts with the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengô), no permanent tripartite council has been established. Representatives of social welfare and environmental civil society groups are rarely represented in or consulted by cabinet advisory bodies. While regulatory impact analysis is reasonably effective, stakeholders are rarely involved in evaluation processes.

### Sustainable policymaking

Japan is the fourth-largest economy globally, with a focus on R&D, high-quality education and healthcare. It is also one of the most generous donors of ODA to the developing world. Nevertheless, after three decades of economic stagnation, Japan has yet to find an effective strategy to bolster economic growth and sustain high living standards. The risk of poverty is prone to increase in line with population aging in Japan, not least because the proportion of persons that diverge from a standard employment career – still at the heart of the social protection system – is growing, and many persons are ill-equipped to increase personal savings and assets to compensate for inadequate pensions. Fiscal policy in Japan is also risk prone as any serious attempt at consolidation has been pushed back and the Bank of Japan, as the main buyer of Japan government bonds, is set to gradually “normalize” monetary policy. This may make it more difficult for the government to issue new bonds and may also put pressure on social cohesion, especially if controversial decisions are made without public debate and with limited policy participation.

While Japan has made substantial efforts to promote a circular economy and build resilient economic infrastructure, it has been less committed to decarbonizing its energy system and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. The existing tax on fossil fuel consumption is very low and the carbon levy, scheduled to be introduced in 2028, is also expected to be set relatively low. The Kishida government has addressed some problems in the labor market for women and low-income families, but non-regular workers remain disadvantaged, particularly regarding social security and skills. The tax system seriously disincentivizes women from seeking better-paid employment. The current government seems aware of the challenges of demographic aging, but its focus on fertility seems questionable, as most governments so far have failed to influence fertility rates simply through targeted interventions without addressing gender roles and gender gaps more fundamentally.

## Key Challenges

Japan needs to address a range of issues related to the accountability of political decisions, a stagnant economy, population aging, fiscal imbalance, incoherent climate change policies and slow adaptation to technological change.

Institutional reforms, which have centralized decision-making, and strengthened the prime minister and the Cabinet Secretariat, need to be accompanied by measures to strengthen accountability and democratic control. The introduction of an ombudsperson to investigate human rights abuses could lead to better protections for the rights of women, immigrants and non-regular workers. The government should also intensify efforts to empower women in all aspects of employment as well as in politics. The role of the Supreme Court, as the only organ that can issue legally binding interpretations of the constitution, should be reinvigorated. Meanwhile, the Cabinet Legislation Bureau should be better insulated from political pressure. The role of the Diet – weakened by informal decision-making, and a lack of resources for individual members of parliament to challenge the government or initiate legislation – should be strengthened through the enhancement of its deliberative, oversight and investigative functions. In addition, it would be desirable to establish a more permanent and transparent institutional framework in which civil society actors are consulted and informed on legislative projects, similar to consultative processes in EU legislation. The creation of an independent regulatory oversight body could improve policy evaluation processes. Despite its effective healthcare system, Japan also needs to strengthen its resilience by improving the coordination and allocation of medical resources, collaboration between healthcare providers, as well as cross-sectional data sharing.

Japan's strategy to counter climate change and reduce emissions is too incoherent and lacks ambition. Japan should reinforce its commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and pursue bolder, unambiguous policies to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Moreover, Japan needs to clarify the criteria for reducing greenhouse gas emissions when distributing public funds for decarbonization, rethink its stance on "clean coal" technologies and raise the level of the planned carbon levy. In general, SDGs must play a more critical role in the evaluation of government policies.

A key challenge for Japan is how it can retain its ability to finance investments in the transition to a low-emission economy, support families with children and improve social security, while maintaining intergenerational and social equity. At the moment, the cost of additional debt remains low due to low bond yields. However, it is conceivable this could change once the Bank of Japan normalizes monetary policy and raises interest rates. In addition, at some point, the central bank may no longer be available as the main buyer of government bonds. The government should openly discuss the options for, and costs and benefits of tax increases and other measures to narrow the fiscal deficit, and invest in Japan's future, as spending cuts will be unpopular and may negatively impact social cohesion.

The pension system needs to be refined to more effectively prevent poverty, especially regarding the growing number of irregular workers, workers earning low wages and workers with nonlinear work histories. These groups are not only ill-served at the moment, but also the recent expansion of private pension plans does little to alleviate these structural deficiencies. Prime Minister Kishida's "new capitalism" vision must take seriously its promise that Japan's growth and wealth will be distributed so that all strata of society benefit.

The over-representation of the older (male) generation in Japanese politics, society and the economy remains a major challenge. It is detrimental not only to the labor market but also to technological innovation. Apart from enhancing support for families, measures to address the implications of population aging should include promoting a better work-life balance for regular workers with long working hours, simplifying immigration procedures and implementing more coherent integration policies. Improved occupational mobility for foreign manual and service workers is inevitable not least because labor market participation is already high for all segments of the domestic workforce. A more comprehensive and cohesive immigration policy should be accompanied by more stringent measures against xenophobia and racism. The government also needs to put more resources into the digital transformation of Japan's economy, which would make it more competitive globally.

# Democratic Government

## I. Vertical Accountability

### Elections

Free and Fair  
Political  
Competition  
Score: 8

Political competition in Japan is generally fair and transparent. Only persons who are under guardianship and deemed “incompetent,” those sentenced to prison, and persons who have been found guilty of violating the Public Office Election Law may be banned from standing in elections. The minimum age for candidates ranges from 25 (lower house, city council) to 30 (upper house, governor). The financial deposit required to become a candidate amounts to JPY 3 million (approximately €18,500) in constituency voting and JPY 6 million (approximately €37,000) in proportional representation. Although the deposit is returned after exceeding a certain threshold of votes (in most cases 10%), it constitutes an obstacle for smaller parties and unaffiliated candidates. In April 2023, a pipe bomb was thrown toward Prime Minister Kishida Fumio by a man apparently frustrated he had been denied the right to run in an upper house election for failing to comply with formal requirements.

Japan’s electoral system comprises 289 single-seat constituencies and 189 members elected through proportional representation for the House of Representatives, as well as a mix of single, non-transferable votes and proportional representation for the House of Councilors. While the introduction of the mixed system to the lower house in 1994 aimed to strengthen competition between the two major parties, the LDP has nonetheless won all but one election for the lower house since 1996. The LDP still enjoys some advantage under the new system, and Komeito, its junior coalition partner for over two decades, can reliably mobilize and instruct the members of Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist sect, to vote for LDP candidates in swing districts, which has further fortified the LDP’s position. In the 2021 election, the two parties won a combined 63% of seats, with 47% of votes. The combination of single-seat constituencies and write-in ballots has also exacerbated the problem of hereditary parliamentarianism (Punendra 2023). At

present, about 30% of Diet members inherited their constituencies. The advantage of name recognition plus personalized voter support groups incentivizes the LDP to nominate the sons (and in rare cases daughters) of retired lawmakers. This practice has limited opportunities for politicians without familial connections and wealth to gain seats in the Diet as members of the dominant party. Moreover, the government and the Supreme Court of Japan have been reluctant to address the disparity in the value of one vote between rural and urban districts – which exceeds three-to-one – favoring conservative candidates.

A major electoral problem at all levels is the gross underrepresentation of women. Only about 10% of members of the lower house are women, while the number of female cabinet ministers rarely exceeds this threshold. In local elections, female candidates make up only 15% of candidates (NHK 2023). Their representation has been helped by the fact that municipalities play a large role in the expansion of childcare facilities (Tsuji 2017). Another problem of subnational elections is that they fail to attract candidates, and assemblies are increasingly sidelined by mayors or governors (Nikkei Asia). In the unified April 2013 local elections, 40.2% of mayoral posts, as well as 14% of assembly posts in 2023, went uncontested.

Both political parties and politicians are required to disclose their spending and sources of revenue. Nevertheless, incidents of illegal donations remain frequent. The Political Fund Control Law does not require the consolidation of reports from various committees charged with the financial matters of one politician, which decreases the transparency of political funds. Moreover, not all reports are digitized, their preservation period is only three years and individual contributions below JPY 50,000 (below JPY 200,000 in the case of tickets for fundraising events) do not have to be reported.

Although there are no legal restrictions on media access for candidates, government officials enjoy greater media coverage, especially in public media. The legalization of social media use in electoral campaigns in 2013 somewhat improved access to voters for non-mainstream candidates.

Free and Fair  
Elections  
Score: 9

The electoral process in Japan is generally free and fair. Voting rights are granted to all citizens above 18 years old, including those living abroad. The only exceptions apply to persons serving a prison sentence and persons who are under legal guardianship and deemed “incompetent.” A five-year voting rights suspension also applies to those who have been convicted of violating the Public Office Election Law. There has been a debate about granting the right to vote in local elections to long-term foreign residents, especially Koreans and Chinese living in Japan for many generations, but so far without

much result. Only in a small number of municipalities have foreign residents been granted the right to participate in local referendums. This issue will likely become more prominent as the share of foreign residents is increasing and it is attracting more controversy with some politicians campaigning against such measures (Takao 2022).

Voter registration is based on residential address. While this system facilitates participation in elections, it also leads to abuses. In municipal elections, for example, it is not uncommon for voters to change their residence just three months before an election, which makes them eligible for voting in the election. As the differences in votes for different candidates are usually extremely small at the most local level, such practices can distort results.

Elections take place on Sundays and the secrecy of voting is ensured. National elections under the proportional representation system are managed impartially by the Central Election Management Council, which decides on the election schedule, accepts the lists of candidates and announces results. National elections for constituency voting, as well as gubernatorial and prefectural assembly elections are managed by the prefectural election administration commissions, while municipal election administration commissions manage municipal assemblies and mayoral elections. The ballot design in single-seat constituencies – which requires voters to correctly spell the full name of a candidate – favors incumbents and hereditary politicians. There is no online voting and absentee voting relies on postal services, which sometimes fail to deliver ballots on time. The number of polling stations keeps decreasing due to depopulation, which makes it harder for elderly people in rural areas to vote. A limited number of municipalities provide free transportation to polling stations.

### Quality of Parties and Candidates

Socially Rooted  
Party System  
Score: 7

There are few legal restrictions on establishing a political party, and the frequent formation and re-formation of parties on the national level indicates that the lack of organizational cohesion and stability, especially on the part of the opposition, is of greater concern for the functioning of representative democracy in Japan.

Apart from the LDP, the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and the Komeito, most parties have only weak organizational structures on the local level. LDP politicians traditionally rely on personal support networks, called *kōenkai*, which organize campaigns and are loyal to individual politicians rather than party branches, while the Komeito relies on the *Sōka Gakkai* Buddhist sect to



mobilize voters. Only the JCP features a nationwide party structure, which has allowed it to consistently field candidates in all electoral districts. The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), currently the main opposition party, maintains close ties with the moderate trade union umbrella organization Rengô. However, it is not a traditional labor party in the Western European sense. Opposition parties tend to rely more on urban voters than the LDP but are disadvantaged due to the malapportionment of electoral districts.

On the prefectural and local level, formally independent candidates who are supported by multiple parties are most common. In national elections, larger opposition parties often recruit and field candidates from outside the party. This has made them somewhat more inclusive of underrepresented societal groups. But even left and left-of-center parties field more male than female candidates. The LDP, on the other hand, is dominated by factional politics in which tenure and party membership play a large role. The LDP has few young and few female candidates. Also conspicuous is the absence of an avowedly environmental party, even though support for environmental policies is generally high.

Japan's postwar political system has long been described as clientelistic (Scheiner 2007) and deeply rooted in interest group politics. In the pre-1994 electoral system, LDP candidates were incentivized to "specialize" on specific interest groups so large parties could get two or more members elected in multi-member districts. This often involved pork-barrel spending and organizing a personal vote with relatively weak party ties. This is said to have contributed to massive public works spending. Although many institutions and laws have been reformed with the goal of reining in clientelism, it is noticeable that public works spending has increased again (Statistics Bureau 2023: 32).

All major parties publish manifestos before elections, which make programmatic choices fairly transparent.

Effective Cross-  
Party  
Cooperation  
Score: 8

None of the major parties question liberal democracy outright, and Japan stands out internationally for its lack of a major populist movement. In the past, Japan's democracy has been criticized for its sometimes opaque decision-making processes, with many decisions taken informally by ministerial bureaucrats rather than elected politicians. A number of reforms in the 1990s and 2000s have led to administrative changes, centralized decision-making and strengthened the position of prime minister. However, the fact that constitutional reform is very difficult politically – as any change must be approved by popular vote – has given rise to concerns that governments may undermine the constitution by changing its official interpretation and application. Prime Minister Abe, for example, used a reinterpretation of

Article 9 issued by the Cabinet Legislation Bureau to justify participation in collective self-defense pacts. This was considered to be a constitutional breach by most experts.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzô's (2012 – 2020) efforts to take greater control of the public broadcaster NHK – such as installing a government loyalist as governor – contributed to the Economist Democracy Index downgrading Japan's democracy to flawed democracy. Under his successors Suga Yoshihide (2020 – 2021) and Kishida Fumio (2021 – present), Japan has regained the status of full democracy, however.

Ideological polarization seems to have declined in recent years. For example, the issue of a close security partnership with the United States used to be highly controversial, contributing to a split in the Socialist Party. Today, most opposition parties do not question the alliance, with the exception of the JCP. Party cooperation in elections has increased in recent years.

However, the Japanese political scene is not fully coherent in its stance on actors who violate the rules of liberal democracy. In 2016, the Hate Speech Elimination Law was enacted against extreme right-wing groups, but it failed to criminalize discriminatory behavior based on race or ethnicity, despite an appeal from left-wing parties. In addition, some members of the LDP, other conservative parties as well as members of the rising Sansei party have repeatedly made xenophobic and in the latter case even antisemitic statements without significant public repercussion. Though such sentiment does not seem widespread, they appeal to Japan's small but well-funded and organized right-wing and nationalistic organizations (Gill 2018).

### Access to Official Information

Access to official information in Japan is regulated by the Act on Access to Information Held by Administrative Organs of 1999, and the Public Records and Archives Management Act of 2009. Administrative organs are obliged to disclose documents requested by any person within 30 days. Exemptions, however, are quite extensive. They include information concerning specific individuals, national security, international relations, the interests of corporations and law enforcement activities. Not only do the heads of administrative bodies enjoy considerable discretion in refusing disclosure requests, but there are also no sanctions for impeding access to information. In practice, most requests are rejected. Appeals are possible either to the Information Disclosure Review and Personal Information Protection Review Board – whose decisions are not binding – or to the district courts, which is time-consuming and problematic.

The Bill on Protection of Specially Designated Secrets, enacted in 2014, introduced severe punishments for disclosing information designated as a “special secret.” The bill was criticized for vesting too much power in governmental institutions to arbitrarily decide which documents to designate, while granting insufficient prerogatives to the Information Oversight Audit Committees in the Diet responsible for overseeing this process.

## II. Diagonal Accountability

### Media Freedom and Pluralism

Free Media  
Score: 5

Freedom of speech and press, guaranteed in Article 21 of the Japanese constitution, is generally respected by the government. Under the Abe cabinet (2012 – 2020), the government strengthened control over public broadcaster NHK through the controversial appointment of conservative figures to management positions and attempted to influence reporting in private media by repeatedly declaring the need to maintain political neutrality. However, since 2021, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has not employed such practices.

There are concerns that Article 4 of the Broadcast Act of 1950, which stipulates that all broadcasters should ensure their programs are politically fair, could allow state interference in media content. This had long been understood to mean that the government would not censor broadcast programs. However, in 2014, Minister for Internal Affairs and Communications Takaichi Sanae stated that, under certain circumstances, evaluations of political fairness could be based on a single program, not only on the entirety of programs aired by a broadcaster. In March 2023, it was leaked to the press that the government had put pressure on bureaucrats to reinterpret this regulation. Prime Minister Kishida did not explicitly retract the interpretation from 2014, but he dismissed the possibility of limiting the freedom of reporting.

Another problem is the Bill on Protection of Specially Designated Secrets, enacted in 2014, which introduced a punishment of up to five years of imprisonment for journalists who disclose information designated as “special secret.” In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the enactment of new regulations that can limit freedom of reporting. In 2020, NHK was added to the list of institutions obliged to follow government instructions in case of a major crisis. In 2021, the government designated 58 areas with restricted public access, punishable by up to two years in prison or a fine of up to JPY 2 million (about €12,400).

There is little active censorship, although some media practice informal forms of self-censorship. The so-called chrysanthemum taboo discourages media from reporting negative information about the imperial family. Journalists who violate this informal rule have occasionally been subject to violence from radical nationalist groups. Moreover, the system of exclusive reporters' clubs severely limits the access of non-established news organizations, foreign media and freelancers to government events and press conferences.

Pluralism of  
Opinions  
Score: 6

Traditional newspapers are still popular in Japan. Japanese media represent a wide range of different points of view – from right-wing (Sankei Shimbun) to left-wing (Akahata, owned by the Japanese Communist Party) – both have a circulation of about one million copies. The two most influential newspapers – Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun – represent center-right and center-left stances, respectively. Other significant titles include Mainichi Shimbun, Tokyo Shimbun and Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Nikkei).

The Broadcast Act prohibits corporations in which 20% or more of voting rights are held by foreigners from conducting basic broadcasting operations. Cross-ownership between broadcasters and newspaper publishers or other media companies is not regulated, but owning all of the terrestrial television and radio broadcasting, as well as the newspapers in the same area is not allowed if there are no local alternative mass media. As a result, an oligopolistic media structure has emerged, comprising five leading media conglomerates: Nippon Television/Yomiuri, TV Asahi Network, Fujisankei Communications Group, Tokyo Broadcasting System/Mainichi, and the Nikkei, Inc., along with the public broadcaster NHK.

While public media tend to avoid excessive criticism of the government, private media sympathize with different political stances. Japanese journalists have generally performed well as the “fourth power” revealing scandals related to political elites. For instance, in February 2023, Prime Minister Kishida dismissed his executive secretary after the media disclosed the secretary's discriminatory remarks on sexual minorities, even though the source of the information was kept secret. However, news media have been criticized as being reluctant to critically question government strategies and information during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tokyo Olympics and the Fukushima triple disaster. Powerful advertising agencies such as Dentsu are thought to have influenced reporting on the Olympics and nuclear power, using their large advertising budgets (NYT 2021; Honma 2012).

Although the high concentration of media ownership is detrimental to pluralism, the gradual decline in traditional media, and growing popularity of

foreign and digital media has created opportunities for non-mainstream sources of information. However, this has also made it easier for extremist, mainly nationalist, stances to penetrate the public discourse. In the absence of any law prohibiting the promotion of radical views, xenophobic or historical revisionist content is widely available in books and other print publications.

### Civil Society

Free Civil  
Society  
Score: 8

Article 21 of the Japanese constitution guarantees freedom of assembly and association, which is respected by the authorities. Marches and street demonstrations require local police permission, but are rarely refused. Peaceful demonstrations are frequently organized by civil society groups representing different ideological stances. These often include protests in front of the Japanese Diet or embassies of different countries. The police rarely interfere, usually arresting only violent protesters.

In principle, those involved in diverse bottom-up initiatives and lobbying for various goals can operate freely in Japan and are not subject to undue restrictions. The activity of civil society groups is regulated by the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities of 1998, and the Association and Foundation Law of 2008. Nonprofit organizations specialize in a wide array of activities, such as promoting health outcomes, environmental conservation, disaster relief, international cooperation, consumer protections, and science and technology. Citizens are permitted to establish foundations and associations regardless of whether they operate in the public interest or not.

Japan's civil society is comparatively fragmented. Most officially recognized NGOs (referred to as nonprofit organizations or NPOs in Japan) are small and have little or no professional staff. Since a 1998 reform, there are now more stringent regulations for obtaining official recognition, whereas previously there had been significant bureaucratic discretion. Nonetheless, many NPOs closely cooperate with authorities or even take on semi-public roles, which sometimes blurs the line between civil society and the state (Ogawa 2021).

NPOs in Japan are generally exempt from corporation tax, though they have to pay taxes on income related to their profit-making activities. Moreover, there are limitations to tax exemptions and deductions on donations from individuals to certified NPOs, as very few NPOs have the related status (NPO Center).

On the other hand, unjustifiable restrictions on protests became more frequent during the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2022, the U.N. Human Rights Committee pointed to the problem of arrests of protesters and journalists, as

well as excessive use of force by the police and recording of protesters, especially during demonstrations in front of the Diet and in Okinawa.

Effective Civil Society Organizations (Capital and Labor)  
Score: 7

Japanese law protects citizens’ rights to form a union and engage in collective bargaining. The Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengô), which has about seven million members, is an umbrella organization that represents trade unions in the public and private sectors. It is the most important organization on the labor side and traditionally an integral part of labor policymaking, sending members to ministerial advisory councils (shingikai) and being invited by the government to join policy debates on the cabinet level. Traditionally, Rengô has supported opposition parties and was increasingly sidelined under LDP-led governments until 2012. Since then, ties to the ruling LDP have somewhat intensified. In 2017, Rengô initially agreed to negotiate a reform of overtime regulations with employers and the government, but eventually withdrew its support following protests from its members. Trade unions failed to raise real wages for almost three decades. However, labor shortages and inflation helped trade unions push through unusually high raises in collective bargaining in 2023.

The Japanese political system has been known for granting large corporations organized in the Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren), the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as the Japan Association of Corporate Executives privileged access to and influence on policymaking. Many large corporations maintain their own think tanks, such as the Mitsubishi Research Institute, and issue their own regulatory and policy reform proposals. While the aims of different industry sectors are not always coherent, they are often reflected in the policies of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. Keidanren and member firms also enjoy a strong presence in advisory councils – especially on economic policy – while trade unions are not necessarily represented.

Effective Civil Society Organizations (Social Welfare)  
Score: 4

One important feature of Japan’s civil society is that most organizations are involved in the provision of services and do not seek to provide expertise or shape policy (Ogawa 2021). The number of organizations promoting healthcare and welfare is 29,641, making it the largest group among Japanese NPOs. NPOs have been particularly active in addressing social problems exacerbated by the economic stagnation of the 1990s, such as suicides and hikikomori (i.e., extreme social withdrawal). The government has provided some funding and encouraged private-public cooperation in this field.

Contrary to the employers’ associations and trade unions, social welfare NPOs do not possess strong connections with the political elites. Although government oversight over NPO activities is much less stringent than before

1998, it is still difficult to function as an NPO without the active promotion by or cooperation of authorities.

Effective Civil  
Society  
Organizations  
(Environment)  
Score: 4

The number of nonprofit organizations (NPO) specializing in the protection of the natural environment in Japan is 13,246. Environmental pollution provided the first impetus for the development of Japanese civil society in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1993, the government established the Japan Fund for Global Environment, which supports environmental conservation projects proposed by different, mainly local, NPOs.

Civil society organizations in the environmental field are generally small, and lack a national presence or the capacity to influence policy. However, in the case of nuclear power, citizen movements through class-action law suits have been successful in preventing idle power plants from being restarted following the Fukushima crisis. For this reason, the contribution of nuclear power to overall production is far lower than the government's stated goal (Koppenborg 2021). It will also make it more difficult to expand nuclear power production as a key method for achieving decarbonization. Government plans foresee a 46% reduction in greenhouse gases between 2020 and 2030, and carbon neutrality by 2050. Unlike in the past, when energy policy was the realm of the so-called nuclear village (genshiryoku mura) – a pro-nuclear nexus of big business, bureaucrats, and politicians – environmental legislative processes are now somewhat more transparent and open to different viewpoints.

Following 2011, there were widespread anti-nuclear demonstrations with participation numbers reminiscent of the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s. Paradoxically, the focus on the anti-nuclear movement may have made Japanese civil society organizations less interested in the topic of global warming.

### III. Horizontal Accountability

#### Independent Supervisory Bodies

Effective Public  
Auditing  
Score: 6

According to the constitution, state revenues and expenditures are audited annually by the Board of Audit. The Board of Audit Act clarifies the organization and mandate of the board. The board is independent of the cabinet. It is composed of commissioners appointed for five-year terms by the cabinet with the consent of both houses of parliament. Commissioners can be

removed from office only if they are sentenced to imprisonment or retire upon reaching the age of 70. While judges were previously appointed from among high-ranking bureaucrats, especially Ministry of Finance officials, at present they are recruited either from academia or from among the Board of Audit bureaucrats, which reduces the risk of collusion with different ministries.

The Board of Audit has the obligation to audit the revenues and expenditures of all state institutions and all juridical persons whose stated capital is based 50% or more on funds provided by the state. If it finds it necessary or is requested by the cabinet, it can audit the financial management of other entities (e.g., those that receive state subsidies). All entities are obliged to accept field audits and provide the requested documents. The board may request the head of a ministry or agency to take disciplinary action against an official who has caused substantial damage to the state. Any crimes must be reported to the Public Prosecutor's Office. Audit reports have to be submitted to, but need not be approved by, the Diet.

Japan ranked average among OECD countries in the Open Budget Survey 2021. A notable weakness of Japan's Board of Audit is the lack of formal mechanisms for public assistance in audit investigations. Annual audit reports occasionally capture public attention. For example, the November 2023 report revealed 344 instances of wasteful spending or inappropriate accounting, amounting to JPY 58 billion (about €360 million). The board also indicated that unsecured financial assistance from government-affiliated financial institutions aimed at countering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic amounting to JPY 69.7 billion (about \$463 million) had become irrecoverable.

Effective Data  
Protection  
Score: 6

Personal data protection in Japan is regulated by the Act on the Protection of Personal Information (APPI) from 2003, which was revised in 2017. The APPI was the first non-EU legal regime recognized in an adequacy decision after the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into force. Data protection is managed by the Personal Information Protection Commission, established in 2016. Its chairperson and members are nominated for five-year terms by the prime minister with the consent of both houses of parliament. Apart from bureaucracy, commission members originate from academia and business, which ensures a certain degree of independence and impartiality. The commission enjoys high discretion in conducting audits. It can issue cease-and-desist orders, though it cannot directly impose administrative fines. Business operators who refuse to follow the commission's orders, however, may be imprisoned for up to one year. In some cases, the reaction of the commission to reports concerning the leaking of important personal data has been slow.



The controls conducted by the Personal Information Protection Commission and its administrative guidance issued to governmental institutions occasionally draw the media's attention. For instance, in July 2023, the commission inspected the Digital Agency due to problems with implementing the My Number system – individual numbers allocated to all residents that facilitate the administration of benefits and other issues. It was revealed that many numbers had been linked to the wrong bank accounts.

In its report from November 2022, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed concern over the lack of sufficient safeguards, such as independent judicial oversight, against arbitrary surveillance and access to personal data by state institutions in Japan.

### Rule of Law

Effective Judicial  
Oversight  
Score: 6

The constitution guarantees the independence of the Japanese judicial system from the government. Judges are bound only by the constitution and the laws, and cannot be subject to any disciplinary action by the executive power. Justices of the Supreme Court can be arbitrarily appointed by the cabinet, but it is a tradition that the prime minister respects the chief justice's recommendation for his or her successor. The appointments of Supreme Court justices are subject to review by a popular vote in the House of Representative elections, but this is effectively meaningless as voters are not presented with a choice. The judges of the inferior courts are appointed by the cabinet from a list of persons proposed by the Supreme Court.

According to the constitution, only the Supreme Court may determine the constitutionality of laws, orders, regulations or official acts. In reality, the Supreme Court reviews only specific cases and has frequently dismissed suits concerning the constitutionality of laws because they lacked the case or controversy requirement. It has also refused to decide on the constitutionality of governmental decisions regarding highly political questions. Instead of the Supreme Court, it is the Cabinet Legislation Bureau that issues interpretations of the constitution on daily matters, which decreases the transparency of this process. Since a 2013 appointment to the Cabinet Legislation Bureau the government has sought to ensure that it offers interpretations that are in line with the government view (Yamamoto 2017).

Japanese courts tend to be lenient toward the government, although there is also a growing number of examples in which they challenge the government's position. The government generally complies with judicial rulings, though it may take some time, for instance, regarding the change of constituency

borders to eliminate disparities in parliamentary election votes. Civil society groups and activists have become increasingly adept at using the judicial system and case law to amend laws and regulations (Sala 2023).

Universal Civil  
Rights  
Score: 6

The Japanese constitution guarantees all basic human and civil rights, such as the right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, redress of damages, education, private property, as well as freedom of thought, religion, speech, assembly and association. All people are equal under the law and cannot be discriminated against because of race, sex, creed, social status or family origin. Access to the courts is guaranteed by the constitution. Arrests without a judicial warrant, torture and cruel punishments are prohibited. Confessions made under compulsion are not admitted as evidence.

Maltreatment by the police is still common. Suspects may be detained for 23 days before indictment by a judge, with a risk of rearrest and prolonged detention. The right to access a lawyer and to remain silent is not always respected, as investigators press suspects to confess to alleged crimes. In addition, long pretrial detention is thought to encourage forced confessions (U.S. Department of State 2022). While rarely applied, the death penalty has not been abolished and conditions in prisons are harsh.

Japan has a low litigation rate and the use of alternative conflict resolution models are common. The World Justice Project assesses these to be fairly accessible, impartial and effective.

Despite the government's efforts to promote the empowerment of women, Japanese society is still largely patriarchal. The revised Labor Policy Comprehensive Promotion Act, which came into effect in 2020, mandates employers to take actions against the harassment of women, but it failed to introduce punishment for non-compliance. Japan ranked 125 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2023. Only about 10% of members of the House of Representatives are women.

The Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force in 2016, prohibited the unfair and discriminatory treatment of persons with disabilities by administrative organizations and private businesses. Nevertheless, Japan has not signed the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which prevents citizens from submitting their complaints to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

A growing number of municipalities are recognizing same-sex partnerships and issuing partnership certificates. However, the legal weight of these

certificates is limited and the right to marriage is still not granted. Japan's legal framework is far less developed than in most other OECD democracies. Although naturalization rules were eased in recent years, some discrimination against Korean and Chinese permanent residents continues. Another discriminated group are refugees. The Japanese government rejects most asylum requests. Foreigners in immigration control facilities are subjected to prolonged detention and inhumane treatment. Foreign workers often face discrimination connected with dangerous working conditions, low wages, and forced overtime work. Since 2021, a smartphone app issued by the Immigration Services Agency of Japan – which is supposed to help verify foreign nationals' residence cards – has been criticized as discriminating against foreign residents and violating privacy rights. The government has not restricted usage of the app and has even advertised it on public trains.

In Japan, there is no independent agency, such as an ombudsperson, that investigates human rights abuses. Because Japan has not signed the First Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Japanese citizens cannot submit their complaints to the UN Human Rights Committee.

Effective  
Corruption  
Prevention  
Score: 5

Corruption in Japanese politics has been fueled by patron-client relationships between politicians and voters. The introduction of state subsidies for political parties in 1994 aimed to eliminate such practices. At the same time, total donations to a particular party or political funding entity were limited to JPY 20 million per year from an individual, and to between JPY 7.5 million and JPY 100 million per year from a company, depending on the company size. Moreover, a maximum annual donation ceiling of JPY 1.5 million per person to an individual candidate was introduced. Both political parties and politicians are required to disclose their expenditures and the sources of their revenues, though such reports are not fully transparent.

The new rules have only partially weakened clientelistic practices, however. Corruption scandals are still relatively frequent in Japanese politics. For instance, in September 2023, former Parliamentary Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Akimoto Masatoshi was arrested under on allegations he had received a bribe from a company that promoted the construction of offshore wind power plants.

Collusive and corrupt ties between bureaucrats and businesspersons have been connected with the practice of *amakudari* – assuming highly paid jobs in public institutions or private companies after retiring from a ministerial position. While *amakudari* is officially prohibited, bureaucrats still find ways to bypass the law.

Japan is a signatory to the WTO Agreement on Government Procurement, the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, the UN Convention Against Corruption, and the OECD Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions. In the 2020 Corruption Risk Forecast, Japan was evaluated relatively well in terms of social integrity but below average in terms of transparency. In its 2019 report, the OECD recommended Japan be more proactive in detecting foreign bribery.

### Legislature

Sufficient  
Legislative  
Resources  
Score: 6

Individual parliamentarians have only a few staff members to support their work. Until the 1990s, each parliamentarian could employ only two official secretaries in their legislative office. In reality, secretaries usually served in the politician's electoral office and communicated with voters. An additional secretarial post in charge of policymaking was introduced in 1993, but even they often lack the expertise and time to focus on policy matters. As a result, proposed bills sponsored by lawmakers are usually drafted by Diet bureaucrats who enjoy considerable independence and leeway due to their expertise. Research bureaus in the secretariats of both chambers examine all matters processed by parliamentary committees. The legislative bureaus of both houses, in turn, examine the constitutionality of bills.

The National Diet Library Research and Legislative Reference Bureau conducts research in cooperation with scholars and experts, which involve interviews, roundtable discussions and field studies. The bureau regularly publishes reports on various studies concerning important national matters.

Due to the rationalization of budget expenses in 2005 and 2010, the number of staff in the secretariats of both chambers was reduced, which contrasts with a gradual increase in the number of Cabinet Office staff. This trend indicates a relative empowerment of the executive against the legislative branch.

Effective  
Legislative  
Oversight  
Score: 7

All parliamentarians may pose questions in written form to the cabinet, which have to be answered within seven days. If an answer cannot be given on time, the cabinet has to clarify a reason and the time by when the answer will be provided. Questions of an urgent nature may be posed orally by a resolution of the house. Since the abolishment of the government commissioner system in 1999, cabinet members cannot be replaced by bureaucrats when answering questions in the Diet, though the answers are prepared by ministerial administrative staff. Answers tend to cite the general policy of the government without addressing the contents of questions in any detail.

Traditionally, the budget committees of both houses serve as the prime venues for the interrogation of the prime minister and ministers by the opposition. Cabinet members are often faced with difficult questions and the deliberations are broadcast live. Prime ministers generally comply with requests to participate in budget committee proceedings, but there have been cases of procedural maneuvers with the goal of avoiding having to face criticism in the committees.

The Board of Oversight and the Review of Specially Designated Secrets were established in 2014 to assess the appropriateness of the designation of “special secrets” by the government. However, the heads of administrative organs may decline board requests for document submissions if the cabinet clarifies why such an act would endanger national security. In practice, often only the lists of “specially designated secrets” – not their contents – are provided to the boards.

Effective  
Legislative  
Investigations  
Score: 4

According to the constitution, each house may conduct investigations related to the government, summon witnesses and demand records. However, under the Diet Law, the cabinet may refuse to submit the requested reports and records if it declares that such an act would be severely detrimental to the national interest.

It is unlikely that the opposition parties will initiate an investigation into the government’s mishandling of issues. Summoning witnesses is possible only if the ruling parties agree to investigate a scandal under popular pressure or if the opposition parties hold a majority in the upper house. Moreover, the approval of two-thirds of committee members is needed to charge a witness with violating the law by refusing to testify or perjury, which is almost impossible to achieve without cooperation from the ruling parties. Special committees for investigating particular scandals are rarely established and witnesses are usually summoned by the budget committees of both houses. The last time a witness was summoned before the parliament was in 2018, when Ministry of Finance officials concealed documents related to Prime Minister Abe’s involvement in the Moritomo Gakuen scandal, which concerned the purchase of land by a private school in Osaka at a reduced price. The investigation led to a temporary decrease in the popularity of the government.

Legislative  
Capacity for  
Guiding Policy  
Score: 5

Standing committees in the Japanese Diet generally correspond to the matters under the jurisdiction of separate ministries, while special committees deal with important matters exceeding the competence of one standing committee. Special parliamentary committees are sometimes used by the government to bypass standing committees, in which deliberations are subject to numerous institutional constraints.

Membership of parliamentary committees is distributed proportionally to the size of political groups in each house. All decisions in the committees are made by a majority vote, with the chairperson's vote decisive in case of a tie. In the past, with a minimal majority in the house, the ruling party often had to choose between securing a majority of votes or the position of committee chairperson. As of November 2023, however, the ruling parties hold a majority in all House of Representative committees. Opposition politicians chair three of 25 committees in the lower house and seven of 25 committees in the upper house. Only in the House of Councilors, where the ruling coalition has a minimal majority, do opposition lawmakers chair some important committees, such as the Committee on Economy and Industry.

Committees typically meet on a weekly basis or less often. The schedule of Diet deliberations is established by the committees on rules and administration of both chambers, which host the representatives of all parliamentary caucuses. As the government has no way to directly control the legislative process after submission of a bill to the Diet, it relies on a comprehensive advance screening of all bill proposals at the ruling-party level. Once a project is acknowledged as a party decision by the LDP General Council, all LDP lawmakers are obliged to vote for the bill. Because serious deliberations on bill proposals take place in the ruling party before their submission to the Diet, discussion in parliamentary committees is conducted mainly by the opposition parties. Discussion time during plenary sessions is greatly limited in comparison with other parliamentary systems in the world. Negotiations with opposition politicians are conducted outside the Diet by the Diet affairs committees of different parties, which decreases the transparency of the legislative process. For this reason, committee deliberations rarely play a role in modifying draft legislation or monitoring ministry activity.

# Governing with Foresight

## I. Coordination

### Quality of Horizontal Coordination

Effective  
Coordination  
Mechanisms of  
the GO/PMO  
Score: 8

Until the 1990s, the personnel resources at the prime minister's disposal were considered insufficient, which was redressed by the administrative reforms implemented in 2001. The newly created Cabinet Office (Naikakufu) has the personnel and financial resources to effectively coordinate policy with the ministries. With a staff of more than 1,000, the Cabinet Secretariat is also well-equipped to provide administrative support to coordinate "important policies," which can now be imposed by the head of government in a top-down manner. Before the reform, the rule of dispersed management (*buntan kanri gensoku*), and prohibited the prime minister and the Cabinet Secretariat from initiating policies within the domains that fell under the jurisdiction of separate ministers. Moreover, new minister of state for special missions and prime ministerial special adviser posts were created, which allowed the head of government to entrust problems requiring interministerial coordination to direct subordinates. The coordination capacity of the Cabinet Office was also enhanced by the creation of advisory councils under the direct jurisdiction of the prime minister, which enabled some bureaucratic procedures to be circumvented. In particular, the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy took over a large part of the budget compilation process from the Ministry of Finance.

Until 2009, coordination on the most important policies between the cabinet and line ministries had been conducted through the Administrative Vice-Ministers' Council, which gathered on Mondays and Thursdays to establish a schedule for cabinet meetings on the following day. As that organ symbolized the bottom-up decision-making process led by the bureaucrats, it was abolished by the Democratic Party of Japan government in 2009. In 2012, the organ was revived as the Administrative Vice-Ministers' Liaison Council. It now gathers only after cabinet meetings on Fridays to discuss the

implementation of cabinet decisions. This change symbolizes the significant centralization of the decision-making process under the Abe administration (2012 – 2020). Other important institutional changes include the creation of the National Security Council and the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs in 2014. The former organ facilitated interministerial coordination on security and foreign affairs, while the latter enabled the strategic promotion of high-ranking ministerial bureaucrats by the prime minister. These reforms contributed to making Cabinet Office civil servants more loyal to the prime minister and his or her closest advisors.

While the reforms implemented since 2001 have greatly increased the coordination capabilities of the organs under the prime minister's direct control, effective usage of the new institutional tools depends on the personal skills of the head of government and the chief cabinet secretary. Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has relied to a greater extent on traditional consensus-based decision-making patterns than his direct predecessors, which has sometimes caused confusion over the priorities of his cabinet.

Effective  
Coordination  
Mechanisms  
within the  
Ministerial  
Bureaucracy  
Score: 5

Japanese ministries are characterized by strong sectionalism focused on competition for funds and power. Civil servants follow fixed career paths in the ministry that hired them. As a result, intra-ministerial trust and coordination is high, but it may hinder the exchange of information and identification of synergies across ministries. Within ministries, most decisions are made in a bottom-up manner through the round-robin (ringi) system. Bureaucrats from different ministries occasionally establish working teams for coordination on important policy initiatives, but coordination is mostly conducted on an informal level. For that reason, competitive policy initiatives by different ministries are common.

Cabinet meetings have traditionally been treated as mere get-togethers to sign documents. Until 2009, they were always preceded by meetings of the administrative vice-ministers representing all ministries, presided over by the administrative deputy chief cabinet secretary – the highest-ranking bureaucrat among civil servants. Only the decisions authorized by this organ could be submitted for the cabinet's approval. The Administrative Vice-Ministers' Liaison Council, which replaced these meetings in 2012, is now only intended for interministerial discussions on how to implement cabinet decisions. Most policy coordination is now conducted by the Cabinet Secretariat (Kantei) in a top-down manner.

Digitalization of government services has been ongoing since the establishment of the Digital Agency in September 2021. One aim is to improve data linkage between governmental institutions. However, so far,



digitalization has focused mostly on government-to-citizen rather than government-to-government systems. Plans include migration of local government IT systems onto a central government data cloud and the introduction of public service meshes to facilitate information sharing between various institutions. Both have yet to be fully implemented.

Complementary  
Informal  
Coordination  
Score: 7

There is a dense network of informal coordination centered on the ruling party which complements the formal coordination procedures among bureaucrats. Before submission to the Diet, all legislative initiatives are subject to advance screening (*jizen shinsa*) within the LDP, which has enjoyed almost uninterrupted status as Japan's dominant party since 1955. The temporary suspension of this system under the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (2009 – 2012) greatly disturbed interministerial coordination processes, but the LDP returned to the old practices after returning to power in 2012.

Advance screening takes place regularly in LDP's policy divisions corresponding to different ministries. Bureaucrats explain the contents of bill proposals to LDP backbenchers and promote different projects among the members of the *zoku* – so-called parliamentary tribes – informal groups of politicians specializing in a given legislative field. The “tribes” represent various interest groups and enjoy considerable veto power in the ruling party, though their influence on the decision-making process weakened under the second Abe administration (2012 – 2020). In theory, decisions of the LDP Policy Research Council and the General Council are made by majority vote, although usually politicians strive for consensus. Under this system, the government would frequently have to make far-reaching concessions to LDP backbenchers. In response, Prime Minister Abe established new intra-party bodies under the LDP president's direct control to circumvent these constraints. Prime Minister Kishida, however, has been less skillful in using institutional instruments to outmaneuver veto players.

### Quality of Vertical Coordination

Effectively  
Setting and  
Monitoring  
National  
(Minimum)  
Standards  
Score: 8

As a unitary state, Japan has coherent standards for the delivery of public services. Adherence to national standards is supervised mainly by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which monitors training activities and personnel transfers between the central administration and subgovernments. Implementation of uniform standards of public services is controlled by the field agencies of different ministries. In 2001, a public sector performance assessment on the ministerial level based on plan-do-check-action cycles was introduced through the Government Policy Evaluations Act. Subnational governments are not obliged to perform similar assessments, but

all prefectures, almost all major cities and the majority of municipalities have introduced self-evaluation systems.

Plans to allow prefectures to diverge from national standards in Special Economic Zones, initially proposed by the Koizumi government in 2003 and later by the Abe government (2012 – 2020), have introduced the idea of letting regions compete for best practices and regulatory reform (Yashiro 2016). However, this has not yet led to major change and regulatory coherence can still be considered high. Japan scores highly for government effectiveness in the World Governance Index. Municipalities and prefectures enjoy some leeway on how to achieve policy goals (e.g., childcare).

Enhancement of uniformity in the provision of public services is one of the key elements of the digitalization of government services, which accelerated after the establishment of the Digital Agency in September 2021. The introduction of My Number – a 12-digit personal number used to streamline and link all administrative interactions of citizens – has been crucial in this reform. However, the provision of My Number cards to all citizens has been plagued with software glitches and privacy issues. In May 2023, it was revealed that 60% of medical institutions using an online insurance confirmation system had experienced problems with the My Number system, including wrongly linking personal data. In total, 130,000 bank accounts were erroneously linked. The large number of reported problems undermines the public image and reliability of the system, even before successive public services are combined through My Number, starting with the issuance of health insurance cards in 2024.

Effective  
Multilevel  
Cooperation  
Score: 7

Coordination between the central government and subnational self-governments is conducted mainly through the secondment of ministry staff to field organizations, and through internal party communication between local and national politicians of the ruling party. In the self-rule index for local authorities in the European Union, Council of Europe and OECD countries from 1990 to 2020, local governments in Japan scored relatively low in terms of autonomy in the financial transfer system, as a large proportion of state grants to local authorities are earmarked. On the other hand, municipalities have gained somewhat in fiscal autonomy. While ministries have considerable influence over local budgets, they receive information about the needs of self-governments through a dense network of prefectural and municipal government agencies. This system, however, can lead to the transmission of interministerial frictions to the local level. Central-local coordination is also ensured by politicians of the ruling party who lobby in LDP decision-making organs for the interest of their constituencies. Due to the depopulation of rural regions, many municipalities in Japan have been merged, which has led to a

decrease in the number of local politicians with connections to central authorities that could redress the situation.

The abolition of agency-delegated functions following the implementation of the decentralization reform of 2000 strengthened local autonomy. At the same time, the Central and Local Government Dispute Management Council was established in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications to mediate conflicts between the national government and local self-governments. The council's rulings are subject to appeal to a high court. Notably, the council became an arena for the legal struggle between the central government and Okinawa Prefecture over the relocation of Futenma U.S. military base. In September 2023, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the government's position.

In addition, meetings of the Forum for Consultations between the national and local governments are held several times each year. The last meeting with the participation of Prime Minister Kishida in October 2023 focused on topics such as decentralization, digital administrative and fiscal reforms, policies for children and child-rearing, and the implementation of the My Number system.

## II. Consensus-Building

### Recourse to Scientific Knowledge

Harnessing  
Scientific  
Knowledge  
Effectively  
Score: 6

Increasing the role of scientific advice has been a topic in Japanese politics for some time and has been highlighted by the experience of the Fukushima triple disaster. Since 2001, the cabinet has been advised by the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation, of which half the members are academics. The council supports the government in formulating policy and can be consulted by cabinet members on any question regarding science and technology. It is also involved in supporting cross-ministerial coordination and initiatives related to science and technology. In 2011, the government announced it would seek to consult scientists more frequently. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Japanese government relied, as did many other countries, on the advice of a select number of experts who rose to public prominence. Initially, however, the Japanese government withheld information from the public and thus did not fully disclose the basis on which policies were decided (V-Dem).

Academics are involved as members of various advisory bodies both on the cabinet and ministerial levels. Their selection, however, is traditionally heavily

influenced by the vested interests of different institutional players. On the ministerial level, advisory councils (*shingikai*) have been criticized as mere rubber-stamping institutions meant to legitimize decisions already made by bureaucrats that reflect the interests of the ministry involved. Advisory councils' secretariats, run by ministry officials, have strong influence on the selection of members, choice of topics for discussion, as well as the drafting of proceedings and reports, which decreases overall transparency. Moreover, scholars who disagree with the ministry stance have occasionally been removed from the councils.

Instructive in this respect is Japan's energy and climate change policy. After Fukushima, the government initially pledged to abolish the "nuclear village" of bureaucrats, politicians and industry, which had dominated energy policymaking, and replace nuclear power with renewables. When the LDP returned to government in 2012, it professionalized the oversight of the nuclear industry by setting up an independent regulatory body. However, it also backtracked on some of the commitments of the previous government to cut emissions due to political considerations as it emphasized economic growth over climate policy.

The Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy has been considered the most powerful permanent advisory body to the cabinet, as it has drafted the policy guidelines for fiscal and economic management, as well as budget formulation. However, only one of its four private-sector members is an academic. Individual prime ministers often establish separate advisory councils dealing with the priority policies of their governments. Among the members of the Council of New Form of Capitalism Realization, established by Prime Minister Kishida in October 2021, university professors assumed only three of 16 posts. While big business representatives dominate in advisory bodies related to the economy, individual academics such as Takenaka Heizô under the Koizumi government (2001 – 2006) or Hamada Kôichi and Honda Etsurô under the second Abe government (2012 – 2020) occasionally exert strong influence over the government's economic strategy. Rarely, they are even nominated as ministers.

The government's initiatives occasionally encounter criticism from academia. For instance, in 2015, a vast majority of constitutional scholars, including some of those summoned to the parliament by the ruling parties, admitted that the legalization of self-defense by the Abe government violated the Japanese constitution.

**Involvement of Civil Society in Policy Development**

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Capital and  
Labor)  
Score: 7

Big businesses involved in the Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren), the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives are engaged in planning policies. The chairpersons of big corporations are often invited to cabinet advisory bodies, and dominate among private-sector experts of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, which prepares fiscal and economic policy guidelines and basic rules for budget compilation. The actual influence of capital organizations on policy decisions, however, is largely dependent on the position of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) in decision-making. While Prime Minister Abe heavily relied on METI bureaucrats, Prime Minister Kishida represents a more balanced interministerial approach.

Trade union representatives as well as organized business have been taking part in advisory councils in the field of labor market policy at the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare for decades. Until the 1990s, this was understood to resemble a veto right on many aspects of labor regulation. With the advent of cabinet-level councils in the 1990s and 2000s – to which trade unions were not invited or held a minority position – the influence of unions has waned somewhat, and policymaking has largely moved to the cabinet level, with organized business remaining influential. On the other hand, Prime Minister Kishida’s agenda of improving redistribution of wealth and the concept of growth based on domestic demand (so-called new capitalism) has made union demands for higher wages attractive even to LDP governments. Rengō has intensified contacts with the government and Rengō Chairperson Yoshino Tomoko is currently a member of the key cabinet advisory organ, which is composed mostly of CEOs from big corporations. In June 2023, the council issued the revised Grand Design and Action Plan for a New Form of Capitalism, which includes a range of labor market reforms, such as support for reskilling, the introduction of job-based wages tailored to individual company conditions and the facilitation of labor mobility to growth industries.

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Social Welfare)  
Score: 4

Most welfare civil society organizations are small in size and limited in their policy outreach. Often, they cooperate closely with state institutions and focus on providing specific services rather than representing specific interests. As a result, their representatives are rarely invited to cabinet advisory bodies. Moreover, despite the large number of pensioners, they cannot be considered a powerful lobby group. The public pension insurance is reviewed every five years by experts on actuarial grounds. This leads to technocratic adjustments of pension benefits and contributions, which affect millions of citizens. On the

other hand, public hearings create an opportunity for NGO representatives to express their opinions on issues such as the social security system.

According to the revised Grand Design and Action Plan for a New Form of Capitalism, issued in June 2023, the Kishida cabinet plans to utilize public-private partnership platforms to expand governmental support for NGOs working to solve local social issues. This aligns with previous policy to limit public spending by encouraging volunteering and non-state provision of services. Particular emphasis is put on cooperation with organizations that address loneliness and isolation, and promote human resources in rural areas and cities.

In February 2022, the Public-Private Collaboration Platform to Combat Loneliness and Isolation was established under the Cabinet Secretariat to encourage cooperation among more than 150 organizations in the field. There were no representatives of social welfare NGOs in the Experts' Council for the Promotion of Measures for Loneliness and Isolation, which is composed exclusively of university professors. Ten meetings of the Forum on Loneliness and Isolation were held in 2021 to hear the opinions of NGOs, which were partly reflected in government policy.

Effective  
Involvement of  
Civil Society  
Organizations  
(Environment)  
Score: 4

Environmental civil society organizations in Japan suffer from similar organizational limitations as in other areas. Most are locally based, have only limited outreach potential and seem preoccupied with promoting specific policies. Several advisory councils under the Cabinet Secretariat deal with environmental issues, such as the Expert Council for Promotion of Climate Change Countermeasures or the Expert Panel on Clean Energy Strategy. However, private-sector members of these bodies are almost exclusively scholars and CEOs of big corporations, not representatives of environmental NGOs. Civil society groups are also rarely represented in the advisory councils established by the Ministry of the Environment. NGOs are consulted by the ministerial Nature Restoration Council, though mainly on the regional level. Overall, the influence of civil society groups on governmental policy – for example, regarding global warming – has remained minimal.

The government's reluctance to extensively consult civil society organizations probably results from its intention to contain dissenting voices. Many NGOs specializing in environmental issues remain rather critical of and distant from the government, mainly due to the reactivation of nuclear power plants and slow progress on decarbonization. As a result, impartiality, transparency and the scope of the consultation process is disturbed.

### Openness of Government

Open  
Government  
Score: 7

A lot of government data in Japan is disclosed in a timely manner. Japan performed well in the OECD's 2019 Open, Useful and Re-usable Data (OURdata) Index, particularly in terms of data availability. Data accessibility was evaluated as average among OECD states, as many datasets are still provided in non-machine-readable or proprietary formats.

While not all data is comparable across different regions and administrative levels, the government has been working on unified standards. In June 2021, the National Strategy Office of IT under the Cabinet Secretariat specified 19 data types in six fields (i.e., person, enterprise, land, facility, law and others) to establish mechanisms for base registries by 2025 and complete the dataset by 2030. Since September 2021, the digitalization of open data has been managed by the Digital Agency. So far, however, the agency has focused mainly on the digitalization of public services. The agency has also been developing the details of the Data Free Flows with Trust concept, proposed by Japan during the G20 summit in Osaka in 2019. The aim of this initiative is to create international standards, guidelines and technologies for the cross-border flow of personal and non-personal data.

Japan systematically stores previous versions of government websites through WebArchive. The National Diet Library is a useful resource for the public and scholars, and even allows public users (with limitations) to commission research by NDL staff. The minutes of all advisory council meetings and all accompanying materials have been made public since 2001 and can be searched online.

## III. Sensemaking

### Preparedness

Capacity for  
Strategic  
Foresight and  
Anticipatory  
Innovation  
Score: 5

Different cabinets in Japan have relied on various organs as central policy units. In 2009, the DPJ government established the National Strategy Unit. However, the unit lacked the necessary resources to adequately perform its tasks. Since returning to power in 2012, the LDP government has relied on advisory councils specializing in separate fields rather than on a single central policy unit for policy coordination.

Civil servants in Japan are not sufficiently trained in strategic foresight and anticipatory innovation, and these skills are not required to pass ministerial entrance exams. The ethos of public officials is based on protecting the interests of their line ministries and following the existing stance of their departments, which does not incite creativity. Most policy proposals among bureaucrats are drafted in a bottom-up manner through the round-robin (ringi) system, which strengthens collectivism and leads to a blurring of responsibility for decisions.

Ministries rarely plan multiple scenarios, though there has been improvement in this field due to the introduction of an ex ante RIA requirement under the Government Policy Evaluations Act from 2001. The necessity to address new challenges in recent years has created the need for seeking innovative policy solutions, though most bureaucrats remain opposed to far-reaching reform. The central government encompasses several organs that support policy implementation in specific areas. In particular, digital transformation and to some extent open government tasks are coordinated by the Digital Agency, which was established in September 2021. About one-third of its initial employees were hired from the private sector, with the aim of making the agency open to new technologies and innovative solutions. Nevertheless, the agency still lacks the budget and staff to achieve its goals in a timely manner. Progress on digitalization has been hindered by resistance from other ministries and agencies.

### Analytical Competence

Effective  
Regulatory  
Impact  
Assessment  
Score: 5

RIAs in Japan are based on the Government Policy Evaluations Act from 2001. All new policies of administrative organs have to be evaluated in terms of necessity, efficiency and effectiveness. Basic guidelines of policy evaluation are prepared by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which also oversees implementation of RIAs and ensures the government-wide coherence of evaluation. The Implementation Guidelines for Policy Evaluation of Regulations from 2007 specified standard principles concerning the content and procedures of ex ante and ex post regulation evaluations. Reviews have to be conducted within five years.

Since the amendment of the guidelines in 2017, Japan has made progress in conducting RIAs and using their results to reduce administrative costs. All RIAs are published on a unified website and stakeholders may submit comments on subordinate regulations online. In the OECD Indicators of Regulatory Policy and Governance 2021, Japan scored slightly above the OECD average in terms of RIAs but last for stakeholder engagement when developing primary laws.



A major weakness of RIA in Japan is the lack of an independent regulatory oversight body. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications only compiles the reports submitted by different ministries and lacks the motivation to improve the evaluation process. In many cases, costs and benefits still are not sufficiently quantified. Moreover, it is not uncommon for evaluation reports to be published too late to have any influence on the content of regulations.

Effective  
Sustainability  
Checks  
Score: 2

In December 2016, the SDGs Promotion Headquarters, composed of all ministers, issued the SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles, which set eight priority areas in line with the SDGs. As a result, SDG action plans have subsequently been released on an annual basis. Since 2017, SDG awards have been given to entities who have successfully achieved SDG-related goals.

In October 2023, the SDGs Promotion Headquarters referred to the OECD report from 2022 to demonstrate Japan's progress in achieving two goals (goal eight: decent work and economic growth; and goal nine: industry, innovation and infrastructure), while pointing to challenges in achieving two other goals (goal five: gender equality; and goal 10: reduced inequalities). However, the verification of SDGs is not based on RIAs. The criteria for evaluating policies from the 2001 Government Policy Evaluations Act refer to three indicators: necessity, efficiency and effectiveness. None of these indicators are directly related to the SDGs. In addition, the Implementation Guidelines for Policy Evaluation of Regulations, amended in 2017, do not give any consideration to sustainability or the SDGs.

The Financial Services Authority in 2022 announced a code of conduct for financial data providers when reporting on ESG data. The Government Pension Investment Fund (GPIF), which ranks among the largest in the world, has increasingly adopted ESG criteria in its investment decisions and is evaluating the impact of its investment decisions.

Effective Ex Post  
Evaluation  
Score: 6

All policies of administrative organs have to be evaluated ex post in terms of necessity, efficiency and effectiveness. The ex post evaluation process is managed by the Administrative Evaluation Bureau in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. The bureau formulates the general rules and standards of evaluation, compiles self-evaluation reports submitted by all ministries, and conducts inspections to improve the quality of evaluations. The bureau also conducts government-wide surveys concerning policies and administrative procedures to propose changes to eliminate inefficiencies. Follow-up surveys are conducted after six and 18 months to ensure the sufficiency of improvement measures.

In the OECD Indicators of Regulatory Policy and Governance 2021, Japan scored well above the OECD average in terms of ex post evaluation of regulations. There is still substantial room for improvement, especially regarding the involvement of stakeholders in the evaluation process. Although there is a unified portal that enables the submission of comments on subordinate regulations, stakeholders are rarely consulted during ex post evaluation.

# Sustainable Policymaking

## I. Economic Sustainability

### Circular Economy

Circular  
Economy Policy  
Efforts and  
Commitment  
Score: 7

Japan was one of the first countries to adopt circular economy policies. It passed the Basic Act for Establishing a Sound Material-Cycle Society in 2000. The act obliges business operators to prevent or reduce waste from raw materials, improve cyclical usage and enhance the durability of products.

As a country that heavily relies on the import of resources, Japan has a natural interest in recycling. Local governments have developed relatively well-managed waste management and recycling systems. However, 80% of waste is still incinerated and much of the plastic waste is exported to non-OECD countries. The Fundamental Plan for Establishing a Sound Material-Cycle Society is reviewed every five years and supervised by the Ministry of the Environment. The fourth plan in 2018 examined three indicators: resource productivity, cyclical use rate and final amount disposed. In the first decade of the 21st century, Japan made considerable progress in all these fields, but there has been almost no improvement over the last decade. Numerical targets for 2025 include increasing resource productivity to JPY 490,000 per ton, cyclical use rate at inlet to 18%, cyclical use rate at outlet to 47% and reducing the final amount disposed to 1.3 million tons. In addition, new indicators have been added, such as the number of local governments working toward developing a regional circular and ecological systems, and reducing household food loss.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has been promoting the circular economy initiative. Unlike the Ministry of Environment, METI is primarily concerned with promoting economic growth. The Circular Economy Vision 2020 treats environmentally friendly materials produced in Japan, such as marine biodegradable plastics, as a potential business opportunity. Cooperation between the Ministry of the Environment and METI has led to

some ecological initiatives, such as the Resource Circulation Strategy for Plastics from 2019. The report also stresses that a circular economy relies on voluntary activities, with the government focusing on encouraging the adoption of appropriate measures. The concept of a circular economy as a business opportunity is also reflected in the fact that the government aims to help Japanese companies engage in the circular economy in order to make themselves more attractive to international investors by disseminating appropriate information.

Japan has promoted a circular economy in public procurement according to the 2000 Act on Promotion of Procurement of Eco-Friendly Goods and Services by the State and Other Entities, and the 2007 Green Contract Law. The criterion of environmental performance in procuring goods and services is obligatory for national government agencies and institutions, while local governments only have to make an effort at implementing ecological solutions. All government entities publish green procurement policies on a yearly basis.

**Viable Critical Infrastructure**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to a Resilient  
Critical  
Infrastructure  
Score: 8

Japan boasts one of the most advanced critical infrastructures in the world with high-quality transportation and telecommunications networks, administration, financial and medical services, as well as an efficient energy sector. Due to its location in a seismically active zone, state institutions have put substantial emphasis on preparing for emergency situations, such as earthquakes.

Different sectors of critical infrastructure are supervised by different state institutions: information and communication services, as well as government and administrative services by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications; financial services by the Financial Services Agency; aviation and airport, railway, and logistic services by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism; electric power and gas supplies, and card services, as well as chemical and petroleum industries by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry; and medical and water services by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

Japan scored highly in the Global Cybersecurity Index 2020. Information security is regulated by the Basic Policy of Critical Information Infrastructure Protection from 2014, which clarifies the responsibilities of various governmental institutions and critical information infrastructure operators. Guidelines in this field are revised every three years. In 2015, the National Center of Incident Readiness and Strategy for Cybersecurity was established.

The center formulates the Cybersecurity Strategy, the Cybersecurity Policy for Critical Infrastructure Protection and other important guidelines in this field. However, indicators to measure the outcomes specified in these documents are rather vague.

Response to emergency situations is coordinated by the deputy chief cabinet secretary for crisis management, who deals with crisis situations other than those related to national defense, such as large-scale natural disasters, shipping or airplane accidents, terrorist attacks, and operations to rescue Japanese citizens abroad. This post was established in 1998 in response to the Great Hanshin Earthquake in Kobe and the sarin subway attack in Tokyo in 1995. In addition, the post of assistant chief cabinet secretary for security affairs was created in 2001. Nevertheless, due to sectoral divisions among bureaucrats, interministerial coordination sometimes remains insufficient. For instance, organizational confusion during the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 led to cognitive dissonance among decision-makers and prolonged disaster-relief activities.

### Decarbonized Energy System

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving a  
Decarbonized  
Energy System  
by 2050  
Score: 4

Japan increased its reliance on fossil fuels after the crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in March 2011 and remains highly dependent on fossil fuels, with 87% of energy production coming from burning coal, gas and oil in 2022. In April 2021, Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide announced the aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 46% by 2030 compared with 2013 levels and to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. This is considerably more ambitious than Japan's previous target of a 26% reduction by 2030.

In February 2023, the Kishida government approved the Basic Policy for Realizing the GX: Green Transformation Policy, followed by the Act on Promotion of a Smooth Transition to a Decarbonized Growth-Oriented Economic Structure, which was passed in the Diet in May 2023. The Basic Policy contains a 10-year roadmap of decarbonization based on the creation of a voluntary baseline-and-credit system, as well as a mandatory emissions trading system and carbon levy. The strategy encompasses 14 action plans, such as reducing energy usage, promoting renewable energy, reactivating nuclear power plants, and introducing hydrogen and ammonia-based technologies. The implementation of the decarbonization policy will be supervised by the newly created GX Promotion Agency. JPY 150 trillion, including JPY 20 trillion in GX Economic Transition Bonds, will be spent to achieve decarbonization goals in line with the strategies formulated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

According to the Climate Action Tracker rating from November 2023, Japan's policy is insufficient to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. The Basic Policy for Realizing the GX has been criticized for lacking criteria related to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the distribution of public funds for decarbonization. Some of the promoted "clean coal" technologies, such as the use of hydrogen and ammonia derived from fossil fuels, may even lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. The carbon levy, planned for 2028, is expected to be set at a low level. As the decarbonization strategy is led by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the primary focus appears to be on promoting economic growth rather than addressing global warming.

### Adaptive Labor Markets

Policies  
Targeting an  
Adaptive Labor  
Market  
Score: 6

Japan has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the OECD (2.74% in 2022) and has one of the highest participation rates for men of working age. In recent years, the participation rate of women has increased rapidly, with Japan overtaking most countries in the G7. Moreover, Japan has mobilized an increasing number of elderly workers. This has helped keep the labor force stable, despite the fact that the Japanese working population has fallen by around 11% since 2000. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market were relatively mild. This suggests that employers and workers have overall adapted well to population aging and a shrinking workforce. The government has made it financially attractive for women to postpone retirement beyond 65. However, similar gains in worker mobilization seem unlikely without more migration – which has increased noticeably in recent years, but still remains comparatively limited.

Large Japanese companies generally recruit new employees from among fresh university graduates on an annual basis in spring, which does not encourage flexibility. Although many firms abandoned life-long employment and seniority wage systems during the period of economic stagnation in the 1990s, they are still common in big corporations.

A key concern regarding adaptability remains the dual labor market where so-called regular workers, especially in large firms, enjoy wide-reaching and continuous on-the-job training. Non-regular workers, including the large number of part-time workers who are often employed on a different contractual basis than regular workers, are usually excluded from training and upskilling. Hence, opportunities for non-regular workers to improve their skill levels and thus address labor shortages in certain sectors are limited. Wage profiles for the two groups of workers continue to differ considerably, which

means the vast majority of non-regular workers remain in low-paying jobs throughout their working lives. Until recently, Japanese governments committed comparatively few resources to job training and placement.

Instead, commercial personnel agencies play a major role in recruiting workers and facilitating mid-career job changes. However, the 2018 Guidelines for Promoting Job Change and Re-employment Regardless of Age introduced basic principles for companies hiring people who change jobs. Meanwhile, a subsidy program for firms that establish pay schemes based on competence rather than seniority was also introduced in 2018. In 2020, it became obligatory for large companies to disclose their quotas for mid-career hires. These regulations have led to a gradual increase in the number of people who change jobs at the mid-career level. Corporations are also taking steps to make the very formalized hiring system for new recruits more fluid and flexible. This system makes it difficult for graduates who start in low-paying or non-regular positions to move into better jobs later, as these are typically reserved for graduates who succeed in the hiring process before graduation.

Policies  
Targeting an  
Inclusive Labor  
Market  
Score: 5

The gap between regular and non-regular workers in Japan has been a great concern for many years. After a phase of labor market deregulation until about 2007, various governments have taken steps to narrow the gap between both groups, such as by increasing social security coverage and strengthening legal provisions on the principle of “equal pay for equal work.” Whereas previously legal rules often only asked employers “to make a credible effort” to ensure equal treatment, Japanese labor law now entails provisions that make employers partially liable for non-compliance.

This has led to some improvements, but wage gaps remain entrenched, and Japan still has a considerable gender wage gap. Japan has the lowest youth unemployment rate among the OECD countries (10.84% in 2022). Still, the Japanese labor market poses considerable challenges to young people. The practice of simultaneously hiring fresh university graduates discriminates against those who do not attend university or graduate from a foreign university. Working times for regular male employees are still among the world’s highest – which makes it difficult for many men to undertake a share of domestic tasks in households where both the husband and wife work (which is the norm in Japan). This limits the ability of many women to increase their working hours and seek better-paid jobs. Ninety percent of all part-time workers, who rarely move up the career ladder, are women. Prime Minister Abe Shinzô (2012 – 2020) promoted the active labor market participation of women by increasing the number of childcare centers. The current government under Prime Minister Kishida has announced a further expansion, which is supposed to put Japan ahead of Sweden. At the time of writing, legislation

entailing JPY 3.6 billion for this purpose was due to be introduced into the Diet.

In recent years, several Japanese governments have also tried to improve the inclusiveness of the labor market by reducing working hours. The 2018 Act on the Arrangement of Related Acts to Promote Work Style Reform limited allowed overtime work to 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year, and introduced penalties for violating the new rules. In 2020, JPY 65 billion was devoted to a three-year plan to promote the advancement of the “employment ice age generation” (people who entered the labor market during the economic stagnation from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s) to regular jobs.

Policies  
Targeting Labor  
Market Risks  
Score: 6

In 2020, Japan spent only 0.24% of GDP on unemployment benefits, well below the 0.58% OECD average. Moreover, only a comparatively small share of the unemployed receive benefits, which can be at least partially explained by the fact that many non-regular positions do not qualify workers for benefits. However, the criteria for participation in the unemployment insurance program have been continually relaxed. In 2010, the minimum expected period of employment was reduced from six months to 31 days and the minimum weekly working hours required were lowered from 30 to 20 in 2012. The unemployment insurance payment period in Japan ranges between 90 and 360 days, depending on the duration of insured employment, age and the reasons the employment ended.

Traditionally, Japanese labor policy has emphasized keeping at-risk workers employed to avoid unemployment in the first place. The Employment Adjustment Subsidy and other subsidy programs have been crucial in this approach and have helped employers maintain excess workers during economic downturns by subsidizing wages. The experience of the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that this approach has been largely successful as unemployment rates remained well below those of comparable countries. In contrast, Japan has always spent far less on active labor market policies than comparable countries. Japan’s Support System for Job Seekers provides some free vocational education and training (VET) programs, as well as allowances for VET participants. Re-employment allowances are also available for recipients of unemployment benefits.

Another major concern of Japanese employment practices has been the treatment of migrant workers. The Technical Intern Training Program, which has facilitated the temporary migration of low-wage workers to Japan mostly from developing countries, has been criticized for allowing abusive employment practices and making it hard for workers to claim rights. The current government has announced that the program will be abolished and



replaced with more formalized mechanisms of labor migration. This could improve the legal position of workers.

Due to the traditionally large role of corporate welfare schemes, the limited integration of non-regular workers and migrant workers into these systems means there are still considerable differences between different types of workers. In addition, there has been a large gap in social benefits between workers in large, and small and medium-sized firms. Public schemes do not mitigate these gaps in any way and are considered – as a government council admitted – inadequate, especially with regard to old age, where most pensioners rely to a large extent on corporate lump sum payments and pension benefits in addition to the public pension. Payments for workers outside large firms tend to be much lower and non-regular workers do not usually receive any payment. Japan has improved public pension options for self-employed workers in recent years.

As in other countries, low-wage workers have benefited particularly from wage growth, not least because regional and national minimum wage rates have been raised almost every year above inflation. In October 2023, the minimum wage was raised from JPY 1,072 to JPY 1,113 (€) per hour for Tokyo. Despite improvements in the situation of non-regular workers, who accounted for 36.7% of all employees in 2022, they face many more risks than regular workers. The safety net still does not cover all non-regular workers, though the Kishida cabinet plans to extend some benefits to those working below 20 hours per week. Furthermore, some trade unions that had previously only accepted regular workers as members began to represent the interests of non-regular workers. Thanks to these changes, the number of involuntary non-regular workers has declined considerably from 3.41 million in 2013 to 2.10 million in 2022.

### Sustainable Taxation

Policies  
Targeting  
Adequate Tax  
Revenue  
Score: 5

Both the welfare and tax systems generally encourage employment in Japan. However, the Japanese tax system seriously disincentivizes individuals, particularly women, from seeking high-paying employment or full-time jobs. After surpassing an income threshold of JPY 1 million (€) per year, workers married to a full-time worker have to pay local residence taxes, and lose some cash benefits and child allowances. Above an income threshold of JPY 1.03 million per year, they are subject to national income tax. Exceeding further thresholds leads to compulsory enrollment in the employees' insurance as well as loss of spousal deduction. Due to these barriers, many housewives prefer to work part-time. The Japanese government has announced plans to

address this problem, though detailed policies are yet to be announced. In October 2023, Prime Minister Kishida also revealed his intention to introduce tax breaks for corporations to promote investment.

While the tax-revenue-to-GDP ratio is slightly above the OECD average, a major issue with the tax system is that revenues continue to fall way short of government spending. Japan has by far the highest debt ratio of any country. VAT increases since 1989 have proven highly unpopular and are often softened with a number of exemptions. Despite continuous reductions in recent decades, corporate tax rates in Japan remain relatively high.

Japan's tax administration capacity has been evaluated slightly above the OECD average in the Tax Justice Network ranking. Generally, tax evasion is effectively punished in Japan. According to the Tax Justice Network, Japan loses more than \$8.3 billion annually due to global tax abuse committed by multinational corporations and private individuals. This corresponds to 0.87% of Japan's tax revenue, lower than the regional average of 1.6% and the global average of 2.8%. Under the Tax Haven Counter Measure Law from 1978, the profits earned by subsidiaries of Japanese companies located in tax havens are treated as income of the parent corporations and taxed in Japan.

Policies  
Targeting Tax  
Equity  
Score: 7

Japan generally has a fair tax system, with 40.2% of revenues raised from social insurance taxes, 19.5% from consumption taxes, 19.1% from individual taxes, 12.9% from corporate taxes and 8.1% from property taxes. Corporate taxes have been continuously reduced but are still comparatively high at 29.7%. The consumption tax rate, introduced in 1989, was raised to 10% in 2019, but remains relatively low compared with other OECD states.

Both income and inheritance taxes are highly progressive with tax rates varying between 5% and 45% for the former, and between 10% and 55% for the latter tax, depending on income. Redistribution is also ensured by a reduced 8% consumption tax rate on food and beverages. In addition, a hometown tax was introduced in 2008 to reduce income disparities between urban and rural regions. Under this system, taxpayers may deduct donations to countryside areas from their income and inhabitant taxes.

Nevertheless, some taxpayer groups, such as farmers, are more privileged than others, as they have access to more tax deductions than salaried workers. Moreover, the introduction of the Qualified Invoicing System in October 2023 put tax-exempt businesses at a significant market disadvantage, compelling many freelancers and small businesses to register as consumption taxpayers to avoid losing clients.

While the redistributive function of the tax system has improved over the years, it remains limited in comparison to other systems (Shiozaki 2020) and is often criticized for disadvantaging low-wage workers.

Policies Aimed at  
Minimizing  
Compliance  
Costs  
Score: 5

Japan’s tax system is relatively complex with many different taxes, income thresholds and tax deductions. In recent years, however, Japan has been working on simplifying tax payment procedures. The National Tax Agency has been implementing the vision of a “society where all tax procedures can be performed without going to a tax office.” Nevertheless, between FY2020 and FY2021, the number of taxation-related requests for reconsideration increased from 4,369 to 4,582, with 10.4% of requests approved in 2020 and 13.4% in 2021.

The Digital Agency, established in September 2021, has promoted the use of My Number – a 12-digit personal number provided to each citizen to facilitate and link all administrative interactions. However, the introduction of My Number cards has proceeded with many problems. In May 2023, it was revealed that 130,000 bank accounts were erroneously linked to the wrong person. Once properly implemented, the My Number system should facilitate payment of taxes, reduction of administrative collection costs and sharing of data between various institutions.

Policies Aimed at  
Internalizing  
Negative and  
Positive  
Externalities  
Score: 5

The share of environmental taxes in Japan’s total tax revenues (1.27%) is below the OECD average (1.40%). As the Global Warming Countermeasures Tax on the consumption of fossil fuels is set at a very low level of JPY 289 (approximately €1.80) per ton of CO2, it only internalizes environmental pollution costs to a very limited extent. In addition, the carbon levy, planned to be introduced in 2028, is expected to be set at the relatively low level of JPY 1,500 (approximately €9.50) per ton of CO2.

Despite hikes in recent years, the tobacco excise tax remains relatively low, which fails to combat health issues connected with smoking. Japan performs better in internalizing the problem of traffic congestion through high automobile taxes.

Japan has a comprehensive R&D tax credit system, under which tax deductions are available for basic or applied research and experimental development up to the ceiling of 25% of the corporation’s or 40% of the R&D venture corporation’s national corporate income tax liability. In September 2023, the Kishida government considered the introduction of additional tax breaks for investments in areas such as batteries, electric vehicles and semiconductor chips.

Sustainable  
Budgeting  
Policies  
Score: 3

## Sustainable Budgeting

Japan has no legal public debt limit. In 2023, Japan had the highest public debt, amounting to 255.24% of GDP, and one of the worst primary balances among OECD countries, amounting to -5.48% of GDP. Even when one takes into account the very high stock of fixed public capital in Japan, the debt level remains exceptionally high by international comparison. Because most public debt (currently 86.2%) is held by domestic investors and bond yields have remained low, the issuance of new bonds has for several decades been used to finance budget deficits. At the moment, the Japanese central bank, the Bank of Japan, holds roughly half of Japanese government bonds (JGB), which likely contributes to low bond yields. How long this policy can continue, however, is unclear. The central bank will find it difficult to end its policy of quantitative easing without higher economic growth and wage growth. Although nominal wages rose by almost 4% in 2023, inflation has meant that real wages continued to decline. As the Japanese population is rapidly aging, it may also become more difficult to find alternative domestic buyers for JGBs once the BOJ withdraws. So far, financial markets have remained confident, however, and JGBs are even attracting growing interest among foreign investors.

The government incorporated some elements of long-term planning into the Basic Policies for Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform issued by the Council on Economic and Fiscal Management. The cabinet has stated its intent to achieve primary balance since the early 2000s but has postponed this target several times. The current government maintains its aim of achieving primary balance and lowering the debt-to-GDP ratio in FY2025, although it may prove challenging due to wage hikes for public employees, expansion of public investment, more spending on childcare and the planned increase in military spending to 2% of GDP by FY2027. The budget takes into account green transformation investments, though it does not refer specifically to SDGs.

The government's fiscal consolidation and structural reform efforts seem insufficient overall. Due to the practice of adopting supplementary budgets, budgetary spending ceilings have repeatedly failed to limit actual government expenditures. The transparency of the budgeting process in Japan is limited because a large number of entities, accounts and policies sidestep spending limits. For instance, according to Article 4 of the 1947 Public Finance Act (PFA), the government can issue "construction bonds" only to finance critical infrastructure but not social spending. To circumvent this rule, Japanese governments have issued ever more "special deficit-financing bonds."

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Score: 7

### Sustainability-oriented Research and Innovation

Despite a severe fiscal situation, Japan has significantly increased spending for promotion of science and technology compared to other expenses since the beginning of the 21st century. In the budget for FY2023, the funds for science were increased by 1.1% compared to the previous year, with emphasis both on promoting R&D of advanced technologies such as quantum and AI, and on supporting basic research and young researchers.

Research and innovation policy is planned by the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation in the Cabinet Office, which also coordinates its implementation by governmental agencies and ministries. In March 2021, the council issued the sixth Science and Technology Basic Plan for 2021 – 2025, which aims to create “Society 5.0,” integrating cyberspace and physical space to balance economic development with the resolution of social problems. This also includes goals such as reducing emissions and promoting “sustainable industrialization.” Referring to the SDGs, JPY 30 trillion (€190 billion) of public funds were planned for JPY 120 trillion (€770 billion) worth public-private investments in R&D. The Basic Plan contains numerical targets and concrete measures for the realization of specific tasks, such as “promoting social change and discontinuous innovation to overcome global issues,” “formation of an innovation ecosystem that is the foundation for creating new industries that share value,” and “promoting university reform and expanding functions for strategic management.” A JPY 10 trillion (€64 billion) university fund was established to increase the global competitiveness of Japanese universities in response to a stagnant number of researchers per 1,000 employment, and insufficient collaboration between academia and industry.

The Japan Science and Technology Agency, with an annual budget of about JPY 280 billion, is engaged in developing initiatives to achieve the SDG goals through science and technology. Its activities are linked to the SDGs Promotion Headquarters in the Cabinet Office, which coordinates SDG-related activities and initiatives across ministries. The headquarters issues an annual SDG Action Plan. The 2021 plan emphasized four pillars: preparing for the next pandemic, building back better strategies for businesses, regional revitalization and social initiatives aimed at strengthening civil society.

Global Financial  
Policies  
Score: 6

### Stable Global Financial System

Due to having an export-oriented economy and the strong position of the Tokyo Stock Exchange, it is in Japan's interest to support a stable global financial system. Japan remains a major shareholder in the Asian Development Bank and traditionally gets to nominate its president. However, the Japanese government has rarely been an agenda-setter in the field of international financial markets regulations. It usually supports U.S.-centered institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, to counterbalance China's initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). As an alternative to the AIIB, Japan has promoted the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure since 2015.

Japan has participated in various initiatives related to maintaining a stable global financial system promoted by the G20 and G7. During the G20 summit in Osaka in 2019, Japan proposed the establishment of Task Force 2 to examine the causes of global financial instability, share Japan's experience in introducing crypto asset regulations, create recommendations for strengthening global financial safety nets and discuss the development of Fintech. Nevertheless, so far, there has been no progress in realizing these plans.

During the meeting of G7 finance ministers and central bank governors in Niigata in May 2023, Japan agreed to implement effective regulatory and supervisory frameworks for crypto asset activities and markets, as well as supported increasing the role and resources of the Financial Action Task Force charged with combating money laundering. In addition, G7 countries expressed their commitment to the disclosure of information on sustainability including climate. Nevertheless, Japan has remained relatively passive in promoting these initiatives. Japan supports the OECD policy of a 15% corporate minimum tax rate.

A potential problem for the stability of the global financial system arises from the fact that the Bank of Japan maintains a low-interest policy, whereas all other major central banks have raised interest rates to battle inflation. According to analysts, the gap between bond yields in Japan and the rest of the world may harm Japanese investors who own foreign bonds and the global issuers of bonds who have relied to a large extent on demand from Japanese buyers.

## II. Social Sustainability

### Sustainable Education System

Policies  
Targeting Quality  
Education  
Score: 8

Japan boasts a high-quality education system. In particular, primary education in Japan is considered among the best in the world. Japanese pupils are top performers in mathematics and science, as well as among the best in reading among all OECD countries. For cultural reasons, teachers enjoy high esteem in Japan. Despite the quality of education in public schools, however, many students attend private so-called cram schools to better prepare for entrance examinations to high schools or universities. The performance of Japanese students often comes at the cost of the “exam race,” anxiety about attending school or bullying.

In 2021, Japan spent 3.3% of GDP on education, which was not high compared to other OECD countries. However, due to the problem of an aging population, expenditure per student on educational institutions has remained above the OECD average. It is concerning that teachers’ salaries in real terms decreased by 2% between 2015 and 2022. If this trend continues, it may detrimentally influence the quality of teaching.

The curriculum guidelines are revised every 10 years by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), which also authorizes textbooks of private publishers for use in schools. The 2017 guidelines put greater emphasis on interactive and experiential learning, communication in foreign languages, and competencies necessary to live independently in a rapidly changing society. While current curriculum guidelines do not specifically refer to the SDGs, they emphasize the importance of building a sustainable society.

The Open University of Japan, heavily subsidized by the government, was established in 1983 to offer distance learning courses. The concept of lifelong learning was introduced to Article 3 of the revised Basic Act on Education in 2006. Lifelong learning is supervised by the Lifelong Learning Promotion Division in the MEXT Education Policy Bureau. In line with SDG goal four, the Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education from 2018 emphasized lifelong learning by promoting school-community partnerships, creating a scholarship loan system to support re-learning, and enhancing education opportunities for the elderly and people with disabilities.

Key challenges facing Japan’s education system include teaching the flexible skills needed to succeed in a globalizing world, and improving the connection between tertiary education and labor market, which currently relies on the massive, annual recruitment of recent graduates. In addition, adult learning and reskilling in Japan is not as common as in comparable countries.

Policies  
Targeting  
Equitable Access  
to Education  
Score: 7

The Japanese education system ensures reasonably equitable access to education for all children. Article 4 of the Basic Act on Education, revised in 2006, prohibits “discrimination in education on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin.” As many as 53% of children at age two are enrolled in early childhood education and care, the highest reported share among OECD countries. Elementary school and junior high school are mandatory in Japan. As many as 56% of Japanese between 25 and 64 years old have received tertiary education, and this percentage is even higher among 25 to 34 year olds (69% among women and 62% among men). The gender gap in upper secondary school completion is negligible. In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology started promoting night classes at public junior high schools for those who had not completed their education due to war, poverty, bullying or illness.

The central and local governments subsidize education to facilitate access to all levels of education regardless of socioeconomic background. Private early childhood education centers are publicly subsidized and preschool education for all children between three and five years old is free. Education is compulsory up to junior high school, although not for foreign residents, and is free in public schools. In addition, pupils are provided with free textbooks. Moreover, students from low-earning families are eligible for tuition reductions, exemptions and scholarships for non-compulsory education. In December 2023, Prime Minister Kishida announced a plan to waive university tuition for households with three or more children, regardless of income, starting from FY2025.

Some controversies are related to the fact that cities such as Osaka and Tokyo started planning to remove tuition fees for all students, which would lead to unequal opportunities for students depending on their residential address. In addition, due to family responsibilities, women tend to participate less in lifelong learning. There are also significant gender differences in the distribution of university students across fields of study. In 2019, there were only 16% of women in the field of engineering, manufacturing and construction – the lowest share among OECD countries. Elite universities, whether public or private, usually only have 20% to 30% female students.



Sustainable Institutions Supporting Basic Human Needs

Policies Targeting Equal Access to Essential Services and Basic Income Support  
Score: 6

Article 25 of the Japanese constitution stipulates that “all people shall have the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living.” The Public Assistance Act from 1950, in turn, guarantees all citizens receive public assistance “in a nondiscriminatory and equal manner.”

Electricity, water supply, sanitation, public transport, digital infrastructure and financial services are widely available in Japan. According to the OECD Better Life Index, housing expenditure in Japan amounts to 21.8% of gross adjusted disposable income, which is above the OECD average of 20%. Additionally, 93.6% of dwellings have private indoor flushing toilets, which is below the OECD average of 97%. Although Japan boasts universal access to essential services, the poverty rate has been increasing since the beginning of the period of economic stagnation in the early 1990s.

While public assistance is provided without discrimination based on social background, sex or reasons for falling into poverty, it is based on certain discriminatory rules. Public assistance generally does not cover those who are able to work but cannot find employment, those who participate in other welfare programs or those who are judged able to receive support from their family members. Public assistance is mostly provided to elderly households, and households including people with disabilities and sick people. It can also be received by those in work whose income is below the minimum threshold to cover living expenses. There are few specific policies to support single parents, which results not only in high poverty rates but also comparatively high employment rates among single parents.

Policies Targeting Quality of Essential Services and Basic Income Support  
Score: 5

According to the Public Assistance Act, assistance in cash transfers is calculated by subtracting a household’s final income from the minimum monthly cost of living. The minimum living cost, established for different regions, takes into account categories such as livelihood, housing, occupational, educational, medical, maternity and funeral expenses. One-time allowances are also provided for the purchase of beds, clothes for newborns and electricity costs. Further financial assistance is provided under the Act on the Promotion of Policy on Child Poverty from 2013 and the Law to Assist Those Experiencing Hardship from 2014. The latter law introduced housing security benefits for those who have problems paying rent as well as the temporary provision of lodging to people who do not have a fixed place to live.

Public assistance is barely sufficient to cover the minimum costs of essential services, such as housing, water, sanitation and energy. Poverty in Japan is also alleviated by the collective culture, which obliges family members to take care of those in need.

One key measure to support low-income households has been minimum wage increases. Although formally set by minimum wage commissions, since about the mid-2000s, all governments have welcomed higher rates and minimum wage rates have often grown faster than average wages. Nonetheless, the Japanese minimum wage is still comparatively low and cannot be considered a living wage. This particularly puts non-regular workers at risk. In October 2023, it was raised from JPY 1,072 to JPY 1,113 (€7) per hour for Tokyo in response to higher inflation.

The Kishida government provided several packages of extraordinary financial assistance to low-income households. In March 2023, it was decided that low-income families would receive JPY 30,000 (€190) and an additional JPY 50,000 (€320) would be provided to them on a per-child basis. These one-time benefits, however, barely improve the financial situation of poor families.

### Sustainable Health System

Policies  
Targeting Health  
System  
Resilience  
Score: 6

Digitalization of healthcare services has accelerated since the establishment of the Digital Agency in September 2021. The gradual implementation of the My Number system – a 12-digit personal number for each citizen – is critical for this reform. Health insurance cards are planned to be integrated with My Number in 2024, but there have repeatedly been problems with the system's implementation. In May 2023, it was found that 60% of medical institutions with an online insurance confirmation system had experienced issues with My Number, including linking patients' data with wrong individuals.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed structural deficiencies of the Japanese healthcare system in crisis situations, such as problems with coordinating the allocation of medical resources, insufficient collaboration between healthcare providers, local governments and public agencies, inability of the government to mobilize the resources of private hospitals, lack of clearly designated gatekeepers to healthcare and inaccuracy of official statistics on medical resources. As a result, Japan's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was relatively slow. Moreover, due to a rigid drug approval system, the initial COVID-19 vaccination rollout proceeded at a slow pace.

Public social spending has increased massively in the last three decades, turning Japan from a small public welfare state to one that spends a similar amount as the large Western European welfare states. Most of the spending hike is due to increased spending on old age and healthcare, and is linked to demographic aging. While spending per head has been kept relatively stable, the rapid expansion of the elderly population has made it difficult to rein in total spending. The government has implemented some measures to offset rising healthcare costs, for example, introducing a community-based integrated care system, which combines various kinds of care for elders at the local level. Japan was also one of the first countries in the world to introduce Long-Term Care Insurance, to which all residents 40 years of age or older must contribute. The challenges posed by demographic aging, however, cannot be considered solved and will grow in severity over the coming years.

Policies  
Targeting High-  
Quality  
Healthcare  
Score: 8

Japan boasts one of the most efficient healthcare systems in the world. However, at the same time, the system is under increasing pressure due to demographic aging. According to the OECD's Health at a Glance 2023, Japan performed better than the OECD average on 73% of indicators related to healthcare quality. Japan has one of the longest healthy life expectancies and lowest infant mortalities in the world. Japan's health budget accounts for 11.5% of GDP, more than the OECD average of 9.2%. There are 12.6 hospital beds in Japan per 1,000 population, compared to 4.3 on average in the OECD, and 2.6 doctors per 1,000 population (OECD: 3.7). The majority of hospitals suffer from doctor shortages but waiting times for medical treatment are relatively short. The care sector is also massively impacted by a lack of workers, with 70% of providers reporting staff shortages. Policies to fill these positions with foreign workers have so far been insufficient.

National health promotion strategies advocate for healthy lifestyles, including dietary habits, physical activity, rest, and discouragement of smoking and drinking alcohol. Prefectural healthcare delivery visions contain detailed plans for treating various diseases and developing different types of healthcare. Prefectures are responsible for annual inspections of hospitals, but public reporting on hospital performance is voluntary. Hospitals are evaluated by the Japan Council for Quality Healthcare, which develops clinical guidelines but cannot penalize medical institutions for poor performance.

Performance has been improved by reducing the number of hospital beds, though the number remains high by international comparison. A 2022 analysis for the World Economic Forum claims there are some deficiencies with primary care and chronic care, but overall the quality of care provided was good. Digitalization of health data is limited to specific localities and a

national system is still missing, which means Japan is behind many other countries in this regard.

To cope with the challenge of population aging, after introducing long-term insurance in 2000, Japan established a community-based integrated care system, which combined housing, medical, preventive and long-term care, as well as daily living support for older people at the municipal level.

Policies  
Targeting  
Equitable Access  
To Healthcare  
Score: 8

Article 25 of the Japanese constitution obliges the government to promote public health “in all spheres of life.” All Japanese citizens and resident non-citizens have to enroll either in the statutory health insurance system or in the public social assistance program, with coverage reaching around 98% of the population. At least 70% of the cost of healthcare services is covered by the state, while the insured pay 30% of costs, with reduced coinsurance rates for children up to six years old, people with chronic illnesses and elders. Benefits are comprehensive, covering hospital and mental healthcare, prescription drugs, outpatient and home healthcare, as well as dental care. In addition, there are a range of subsidies for some chronic diseases, as well as people living with disabilities and mental illnesses. There is also a yearly maximum for out-of-pocket payment for households using healthcare and long-term services, which varies depending on age and income.

There are some disparities in healthcare access between regions. Due to the merger of many municipalities at the beginning of the 21st century, the provision of some healthcare services and long-term care services have become problematic in depopulated rural areas. The reduction of health disparities between prefectures has been specified as one of the goals of national health promotion strategies since 2012.

**Gender Equality**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving  
Gender Equality  
Score: 5

Japan is a socially conservative society where traditional gender roles are still highly relevant. A gendered division of labor is still deeply entrenched, with domestic care work predominantly remaining in the hands of women and take-up rates of parental leave by men still very low, though growing. However, due to population aging among other things, the role of women has changed significantly over the last few decades. Today, employment rates of women are high in international comparison and double-income households have become the norm.

Japanese politics, and especially its many conservative governments, have been slow to adapt to this changing reality. However, since the mid-2000s,

they have increasingly sought to promote change through policy. Prime Minister Abe received international attention for his so-called womenomics strategy, which promised to open the labor market for women beyond marginal and part-time employment. One key element is the expansion of childcare facilities and the current administration has announced it will significantly increase spending in this area. Furthermore, Japan has built a large and encompassing institutional structure to report on the status of gender equality and to develop initiatives.

Gender equality in Japan is regulated by the Basic Act for a Gender-Equal Society from 1999, which obliges national and local governments to develop and implement measures to redress disparities between men and women in political, economic, social and cultural spheres. The government submits an annual report on the implementation of the Basic Act to the Diet. Every few years, basic plans for gender equality are formulated, which contain specific numerical targets. The Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality from March 2021 is broken into various action plans covering fields, such as the expansion of women's participation in decision-making; securing equal opportunities and treatment between women and men, and work-life balance; gender equality in academia, science and technology; and elimination of all forms of violence against women. Targets are relatively detailed and include goals such as increasing the proportion of women section chiefs in national administration to 30% by the end of FY2025.

Since the establishment of the post of ministers of state for special missions in 2001, there has always been one tasked with coordinating governmental efforts regarding gender equality. The Cabinet Office also maintains the Council for Gender Equality, composed of ministers and private-sector experts, as well as the Gender Equality Bureau, which typically use indicators for measuring progress and setting tasks.

Despite all these formal efforts, women remain severely underrepresented in Japanese politics, both on the national and local level. Only about 10% of members of parliament in the lower house are female and even in the current cabinet – which features a record number of female ministers – their share does not exceed 20%. In addition, not a single woman was appointed to one of the 54 vice-ministerial or parliamentary vice-ministerial posts, down from 11. Similar patterns are visible in elite universities, where only 20% to 30% of graduates in executive positions and in most elite occupations are women. In 2018, it emerged that some medical schools deliberately downgraded entrance tests of women compared to men. This practice has been stopped since and in newer tests female applicants appear to have outperformed their male peers (McCurry 2022).

Critics have pointed out that Japan's governments seem not genuinely interested in improving the position of women in society but rather look at their economic contribution as workers that can help mitigate the impact of labor shortages. Prime Minister Kishida's comment that women ministers would bring "sense and empathy which are unique to women" was widely criticized as sexist and as an indication of how little has changed in attitudes.

### Strong Families

Family Policies  
Score: 5

Against the background of a rapidly aging society and low fertility rates, the Japanese government has been paying increasing attention to problems related to the costs of sustaining families. Parents of newborn children are entitled to a maximum of 14 months of paid post-natal leave – eight months for mothers and six months for fathers. This can be extended until the child reaches 24 months of age if the child was denied admission to a childcare center. There is also unpaid leave for a maximum of five days per year in case of a child's illness or injury, as well as paid leave of up to 93 days per lifetime for a family member who requires long-term care. Employers are prohibited from imposing excessive overtime on employees who have children below compulsory school age or who discriminate against workers who take parental or family care leaves. Parents of children below the age of three are entitled to an unpaid reduction in working hours to six hours per day. Fees for early childhood education and care services are fully subsidized for children between three and five years of age.

While the family support system is generous, not all families can take full advantage of it. Only women covered by the Employees' Health Insurance system may receive maternity benefit payments. Moreover, paternity and parental leave are unavailable for self-employed workers, day laborers, some workers on fixed-term contracts and same-sex couples. Overall, Japanese politics is still strongly shaped by traditional ideas of family, which may partially explain why single-parent households face significantly higher poverty risks than in most other economically advanced democracies.

In April 2023, the Children and Families Agency was established, combining various child-related departments previously spread across different ministries. The agency is composed of three departments in charge of policy planning based on data analysis, pregnancy and childbirth support, care for preschool children, measures for single-parent families, prevention of child abuse and poverty reduction.

The Kishida government announced in the summer of 2023 that all families will be entitled to receive a child allowance of JPY 15,000 (€100) per month for children up to three years old and JPY 10,000 (€65) per month for children up to 15 years old. From October 2024, the payment will increase to JPY 30,000 (€200) for the third and subsequent children. In addition, the Kishida government provided several extraordinary financial assistance packages to low-income households, such as JPY 30,000 (€90) per household, with an additional JPY 50,000 (€320) per child, announced in March 2023.

### Sustainable Pension System

Policies Aimed at  
Old-Age Poverty  
Prevention  
Score: 5

Japan spends 9.3% of GDP on its public pension system, which is above the OECD average (7.7%). All Japanese between 20 and 59 years old are enrolled in the basic pension scheme, while all employees are additionally enrolled in the earnings-related plan. Self-employed workers pay a flat-rate contribution and employees pay 18.3% of their salaries, with half of it covered by employers. The retirement age is 65.

The basic pension benefit in 2022 amounted to only JPY 777,800 (€5,000) per year for workers who have contributed fully and without interruption. Workers are exempt from contributing to the basic pension during maternity periods and parental leaves. Unemployed persons remain in the basic pension scheme and may be fully or partly exempt from paying a flat-rate contribution depending on household income. Periods spent out of work due to childcare are taken into account in the earnings-related pension insurance scheme up to three years per child.

Net pension replacement rates from mandatory schemes in Japan are among the lowest, while the senior citizen poverty rate is among the highest in the OECD. However, most regular workers receive large lump sum payments at the end of their careers and these payments constitute an important source of income in old age. Actual poverty rates are, therefore, lower than income figures suggest. Nonetheless, workers with non-standard work biographies and, in particular non-regular workers, rarely receive such payments and thus are particularly hard hit by the low replacement level of the public pension system. Alternative ways to save for old age, such as Nippon Individual Savings Accounts (NISA) and Individual Defined Contribution Accounts (iDeCo), have only been rolled out in recent years and may come too late for workers who will retire within the next decade. Moreover, they require that wages are high enough so that workers are able to make contributions, which is rarely the case in low-paying non-regular jobs.

Policies  
Targeting  
Intergenerational  
Equity  
Score: 6

Japanese governments have increasingly set incentives for elderly workers to continue working after reaching the retirement age of 65. Between the age of 65 and 70 benefits can increase by 8.7% for every year retirement is postponed. It is permitted to combine the receipt of a pension with work, though after exceeding a certain base amount, the earnings-related pension payment is reduced. Employees above 70 years old are exempt from paying pension contributions.

The labor market participation rates of elderly workers have always been high in Japan but were declining until 2012. Since 2012, they have increased, which may also reflect that public pension benefits, payments from corporate pension schemes and severance pay have declined. Since a large part of financial security stems from assets accrued during working life, continuing work can be a way of compensating for reductions in wages, pension payments and lower returns on investments due to low interest rates.

The adjustment of benefit and contribution levels is partially technocratic and provides the government with tools to curb benefit increases. Since 2004, the government can use the so-called macroeconomic slide to keep pension raises below wage increases and inflation, which in 2024 will be used for the second time in a row. A key structural problem is that the ratio of pensioners and working-age population is continuously worsening. In the 2004 pension reform, the practice of raising contributions to maintain a stable level of benefits was replaced with contributions capped at 18.3% of salaries and a demographically modified indexation program.

The financial integrity and generational equity of the pension system is supported further by the Government Pension Investment Fund (GPIF), one of the largest public pension funds in the world. It manages the reserves of the public pension system and GPIF investments have successfully increased the return on investment over the years. The reserves are meant to stabilize the ratio between benefits and contributions over a period of 100 years.

Younger cohorts in Japan will still receive lower benefits in the future and must compensate for these decreases by saving through other means. To encourage this, Nippon Individual Savings Accounts (NISA) and Individual Defined Contribution Accounts (iDeCo) have been introduced and expanded over the last decade. However, for these accounts to work as desired, workers need to earn enough to save for old age in addition to traditional pension schemes. Non-regular and low-wage workers, whose wages hardly increase over the life cycle and who rarely receive bonus payments, thus face a particularly high risk of poverty in old age.



### Sustainable Inclusion of Migrants

Integration Policy  
Score: 3

For many years, Japan has struggled to develop a coherent immigration policy. While the need for migration is widely recognized by politicians and society, not least due to worsening labor shortages, policymakers have long tried to assure the public that problems of integration as seen in Western Europe could be avoided by either inviting migrants of Japanese descent from South America or by making labor migration temporary. One of the largest programs in the latter sense has been the Technical Intern Training Program, which has allowed unskilled workers to stay in Japan for up to five years. Working conditions have often been harsh and there have been a number of scandals over the years where employers were found to exploit or mistreat migrant workers. In 2023, the Kishida government announced it would replace the program with a formalized scheme for low-wage workers.

Japanese governments have gradually opened some pathways to long-term settlement in Japan for highly skilled workers but also for medium-skilled workers who possess skills that are in short supply. However, the system for specified skilled worker visas – introduced in 2019 – is rather restrictive, with rigid quotas for workers in different categories. Most workers cannot bring their families to Japan or hope to stay in Japan more than five years. Language and cultural competency requirements continue to constitute obstacles to foreign professionals, including graduates of Japanese universities.

The Migrant Integration Policy Index described Japan’s approach in 2019 as “immigration without integration,” pointing particularly to problems with education, political participation and non-discrimination. Support for intercultural education throughout the school curriculum is limited, foreign permanent residents lack the right to vote in local elections and there is no dedicated anti-discrimination law. However, there has been a slight improvement in the political participation of immigrants, as several municipalities have granted foreign residents the right to participate in local referenda. Moreover, legal migrants and asylum-seekers have access to the Japanese healthcare system. But the number of recognized refugees is very low and most asylum-seekers have lived in Japan in a precarious legal state.

The period of 10 years of continuous residence in Japan is a relatively high requirement for permanent residency, though highly skilled professionals and permanent residents’ family members can apply earlier. The naturalization process is not particularly difficult, but dual citizenship is forbidden. Gaining Japanese citizenship has become easier for the Zainichi – Koreans living in Japan for several generations – whose rights had been limited in the past.

Immigration procedures are supervised by the Immigration Bureau of the Ministry of Justice, which has been extremely reluctant to recognize the refugee status of immigrants. In November 2022, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concerns over poor health conditions in immigration detention facilities and the low rate of refugee recognition in Japan. It also appealed to Japan to improve the precarious situation of persons who lost their visas or resident status and are on “provisional release,” without the possibility of engaging in income-generating activities.

### Effective Capacity-Building for Global Poverty Reduction

Management of  
Development  
Cooperation by  
Partner Country  
Score: 7

The Japanese government has traditionally emphasized comprehensive security based on the provision of official development assistance (ODA). Although three decades of economic stagnation have led to cuts in Japan’s ODA budget, Japan remains the fourth-largest ODA donor in the OECD. ODA is managed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Since 2005, poverty reduction has been one of the top priorities in Japan’s ODA charter.

The Development Cooperation Charter was revised in June 2023 to further emphasize security and the rule of law, as well as promote participation of the private sector. The charter specifies four basic policies: contributing to peace and prosperity, human security in the new era, co-creation of social values through dialogue and cooperation with developing countries, and leading the dissemination and implementation of international rules and guidelines based on inclusiveness, transparency and fairness. Japan’s ODA is directed in a balanced and fairly predictable way to aims such as poverty eradication, food and energy security, quality infrastructure, and disaster risk reduction.

White papers on development cooperation have been published on an annual basis. In recent years, Japan provided health and medical equipment and vaccines, as well as assisted in networking regional hospitals and developing the capacity of healthcare workers in low-income regions. It provided food aid to many developing countries suffering from diseases and natural disasters, transferred technology in areas such as construction and communications, and promoted science and innovation in recipient states.

According to ODA Evaluation Guidelines, evaluation of relevance of policies, effectiveness of results, and appropriateness of processes is based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act Cycle and conducted mostly by third-party evaluators. In addition to assessing the contribution of ODA to the development of partner states, the relationship with Japan’s national interests is also examined.

Relevant numerical indicators are identified for various priority issues. Evaluation is accompanied by recommendations that include targets, objectives, actions, priorities and a timeline. Even though Japan has increasingly used ODA as a vehicle to advance its national interests, poverty reduction has remained the prime goal of development cooperation.

### III. Environmental Sustainability

#### Effective Climate Action

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Achieving  
Climate  
Neutrality by  
2050  
Score: 4

Despite some progress in formulating policies against global warming in recent years, Japan's commitment to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 remains weak. In 2023, Japan ranked 58th out of 67 countries in the 2024 Climate Change Performance Index, eight positions lower than before. In 2021, then-Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide declared the aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 46% by 2030 compared to 2013 levels and to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 – a considerable increase from Japan's previous target of a 26% reduction by 2030. During the G7 Summit in Hiroshima in May 2023, Japan agreed to refrain from constructing new coal power plants.

The Global Warming Countermeasure Plan, issued in October 2021 by the governmental Global Warming Prevention Headquarters, is supplemented by a long list of indicators and timelines that run up to 2030. Targets, divided among different ministries, include indicators such as the proportion of next-generation vehicles in new car sales or the number of LED road lights on national highways. The strategy is based mainly on reducing energy consumption, technological innovation and decarbonization. Monitoring of progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions is conducted annually by the government, without much involvement by independent climate councils. Lawsuits filed by climate activists, such as those against coal-fired power plants, are relatively rare and judges tend to treat climate problems as policy matters.

In February 2023, the Kishida cabinet published the Basic Policy for Realizing the GX: Green Transformation Policy. The document, containing 14 action plans, stipulates a 10-year strategic decarbonization roadmap, which includes a voluntary baseline-and-credit system, a mandatory emissions trading system and a carbon levy. The newly created GX Promotion Agency will be responsible for the management of a JPY 150 trillion decarbonization fund.

However, the strategy focuses on promoting economic growth rather than countering global warming. The carbon levy is expected to be set at a low level and introduced as late as 2028. No clear criteria related to reduction of greenhouse gas emissions were formulated for distribution of public funds for decarbonization. Moreover, some “clean coal” technologies promoted by the government, such as the use of hydrogen and ammonia derived from fossil fuels, may even lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

The environmental performance criterion for procuring goods and services, including impact on climate, is obligatory for national government agencies and institutions, while local governments only have to make efforts to implement ecological solutions.

According to Climate Action Tracker rating from November 2023, Japan’s policy is insufficient to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. Moreover, Japan has blocked discussions on decarbonized transport and power systems in international fora such as the G7 or the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change. Such behavior calls into doubt Japan’s sincerity in tackling global warming.

### Effective Environmental Health Protection

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Minimizing  
Environmental  
Health Risks  
Score: 7

After experiencing severe environmental pollution due to the country’s rapid industrialization in the 1960s, Japan introduced a range of environmental protection regulations, which led to a significant decrease in air, water and soil pollution. The 1993 Basic Act on the Environment defined the responsibilities of the central and local governments in preserving the natural environment. The Basic Environment Plan is reviewed every few years. It sets legally binding numerical environmental quality standards for air, noise, water and soil pollution, as well as waste disposal.

Coordination of implementing environmental strategies is conducted by the Ministry of the Environment and its Central Council for the Environment. The Fifth Basic Environment Plan from April 2018 formulated six comprehensive priority strategies: Formulation of a Green Economic System for Realizing Sustainable Production and Consumption, Improvement of Value of National Land as Stock, Sustainable Community Development Using Local Resources, Realization of a Healthy and Prosperous Life, Development and Dissemination of Technologies Supporting Sustainability, and Demonstration of Japan’s Leadership through International Contributions and Building Strategic Partnerships. While the strategies are accompanied by a range of detailed targets, such as restoring sound water circulation and promoting farming

photovoltaics, the plan does not contain clear numerical indicators to measure progress.

The most controversial recent environmental decision by a Japanese government was the release of treated water from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant into the ocean in August 2023. While the International Atomic Energy Agency announced that the water met international safety standards, according to some experts, it still posed certain health hazards. According to the Environmental Performance Index, Japan is one of the most advanced countries in the world when it comes to environmental health.

### Effective Ecosystem and Biodiversity Preservation

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to Preserving  
Ecosystems and  
Protecting  
Biodiversity  
Score: 7

Japan is committed to implementing comprehensive policies that preserve biodiversity. By 2020, it managed to exceed the Aichi Biodiversity Target, preserving 20.5% of land and 13.3% of sea territory. The Kishida cabinet has declared its commitment to protecting 30% of land and oceans by 2030 – stipulated during the Conference of the Parties to the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal in December 2022.

In April 2022, the Ministry of the Environment issued the 30by30 Roadmap. The document contains numerical indicators, for example, certification of a minimum of 100 “other effective area-based conservation measures” (OECM) sites by the end of 2023 and doubling the area of marine parks in national parks by the end of 2030. The 30by30 Alliance for Biodiversity, a platform composed of public and private-sector organizations, was created to promote biodiversity goals. An important part of this initiative is the restoration of traditional ecosystems, such as Satoyama – landscapes that combine farmlands, irrigation, forests and wetlands.

While Japan has put much emphasis on meeting biodiversity standards, it still has to reconcile biodiversity goals with some major infrastructure projects. Public works, while less important than in the 1990s, still play a significant role in maintaining employment in rural and economically less developed regions. Critics have likened it to a concretization of the Japanese landscape, which has more to do with politics than public needs. The construction of a maglev train linking Tokyo and Osaka – which already has one of the fastest bullet train connections in the world – was delayed due to concerns over its impact on the ecosystem in Shizuoka Prefecture.

**Effective Contributions to Global Environmental Protection**

Policy Efforts  
and Commitment  
to a Global  
Environmental  
Policy  
Score: 5

While Japan was a global leader in tackling global warming in the 1990s and hosted the Kyoto conference in 1997, it has remained largely passive since the beginning of the 21st century. Among other factors, withdrawal from actively promoting global climate policies was motivated by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant crisis caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, which led to an increase in Japan’s reliance on fossil fuels.

During COP28 in December 2023, Japan promised to create a new African Development Bank fund, and increase the World Bank and Asian Development Bank loan capacity by approximately \$9 billion. On the other hand, Japan has blocked discussions on decarbonized transport and power systems in international fora such as the G7 and the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change. Instead, Japan has led the Asia Zero Emissions Community (AZEC) – hosting a summit in Tokyo in December 2023 – to promote “clean coal” technologies in ASEAN countries. This initiative met with protests from climate activists, who criticize it for prolonging the use of fossil fuels instead of promoting renewable energy sources.

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