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Kominkan as a Model for Non-Formal Education and Community-Based Sustainable Development in Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical evolution and contemporary significance of Japan's Kominkan (community learning centers) as vital institutions for community-based sustainable development (CBSD). Emerging from the ashes of World War II, Kominkan were conceived as engines for democratic reconstruction and social cohesion. Utilizing a historical analysis framework and drawing upon Japanese educational policy documents, scholarly literature, and UNESCO reports, this paper traces the transformation of Kominkan functions from post-war recovery through rapid economic growth to the era of lifelong learning and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This paper argues that Kominkan's inherent flexibility, community-rootedness, and focus on mutual learning position them uniquely as platforms for CBSD. The analysis highlights key shifts: from initial poverty alleviation and cultural revival to addressing urbanization's social fragmentation, adapting to lifelong learning paradigms, and increasingly incorporating ESD and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) post-2011. Despite challenges in human resource capacity, particularly the reliance on part-time staff, Kominkan demonstrate remarkable resilience in fostering social capital, empowering local agency, and mobilizing communities towards sustainable futures. The paper concludes that Kominkan offer a globally relevant model for leveraging non-formal education infrastructure for sustainable community resilience and development.

Keywords: Kominkan, Community Learning Centers, Community-Based Sustainable Development (CBSD), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Non-formal Education in Japan

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1. Introduction: Kominkan as hubs of Community and Sustainability

The Education systems globally are increasingly recognizing the critical role of non-formal and community-based learning in fostering sustainable societies (Abdellatif, 2020; Wals, 2012; UNESCO, 2015). Within Japan's tripartite education system, which comprises formal schooling, home education, and social education (*shakaikyoiku*), Kominkan stand out as the most historically significant facilities dedicated to lifelong learning and community empowerment (Sasai, 2013; NIER, 2018). Established in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Kominkan were envisioned not merely as venues for classes, but as foundational institutions for: rebuilding a shattered nation from the grassroots up; fostering democratic citizenship; and enhancing the cultural and practical capacities of all community members (Inoue, 2015; Iwasa, 2010).

This paper argues that the history and evolving functions of Kominkan represent a profound case study in community-based sustainable development (CBSD). CBSD emphasizes local agency, participatory decision-making, leveraging indigenous knowledge, and building resilient social structures to address environmental, economic, and social challenges (Maser, 1997; Rist et al., 2007). By providing a structured analysis of Kominkan's historical trajectory, from post-war reconstruction through economic transformation and into the contemporary era of sustainability challenges, this paper elucidates how these community learning centers have adapted to serve as dynamic platforms for CBSD.

The core argument is that Kominkan's foundational principles of mutual learning, community ownership, responsiveness to local needs, and function as social nexuses inherently align with CBSD objectives. Their evolution demonstrates a capacity to pivot towards emerging societal priorities, most notably in recent decades embracing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) as core activities (JNCU, 2015; Makino, 2018). Drawing primarily on Japanese scholarship, policy documents, and UNESCO reports, this paper synthesizes existing knowledge on Kominkan, reframing it explicitly through the lens of sustainable community development.

While Kominkan has a unique system, it shares philosophical foundations with other global institutions for non-formal and community-based education. These include the Korean lifelong learning centers (Park, 2010), Nordic 'folk high schools' that focus on democratic citizenship (Maliszewski, 2002), the European residential folk high schools inspired by the Nordic folk high school model in Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (Kulich, 2002), and the expanding community-hub role of North American public libraries (Varheim, 2014). However, the Kominkan's explicit, legally mandated role as a municipal facility for social education, and its deep integration into local administration and, more recently, ESD and DRR, present a unique case. This paper addresses a gap by moving beyond a simple description to reframe the Kominkan as an adaptable, transferable model for CBSD. It addresses the following questions:

1. How did the original conception and functions of Kominkan align with principles of community-based recovery and development?
2. How did Kominkan adapt their functions in response to major socio-economic shifts (e.g., urbanization, rapid growth, the lifelong learning turn)?
3. In what ways have Kominkan explicitly incorporated sustainable development goals, particularly ESD and DRR, into their contemporary mission?
4. What are the implications of Kominkan's human resource structure (staffing models) for their capacity to drive CBSD?

2. Conceptual Framework: Social Education, Lifelong Learning, and Community-Based Sustainable Development

Understanding Kominkan necessitates grounding in Japan's unique framework of social education (*shakaikyoiku*). Legally defined in the Social Education Law (Article 2) as "organized educational activities, including physical education and recreational activities, conducted mainly for youth and adults, excluding educational activities conducted as part of school curricula" (Murata & Yamaguchi, 2010, p. 15), social education encompasses the vast landscape of non-formal and informal learning outside the formal school system (Kawano, Matsuda & Xiao, 2016). Kominkan are explicitly designated as core facilities for delivering social education (Social Education Law, Article 20).

The philosophy underpinning Kominkan resonates strongly with theories of lifelong learning, which advocate for learning opportunities across the lifespan and in diverse settings (Jarvis, 2007). Kominkan operationalize this by providing accessible learning spaces for all generations, fostering intergenerational dialogue and community problem-solving (UIL, 2017). This function became increasingly codified as Japan formally embraced lifelong learning policies in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the reorganization of the Ministry of Education's Social Education Bureau into the Lifelong Learning Bureau in 1988 (Maruyama, 2011; Yamamoto, 2003).

CBSD represents a paradigm that grounds the principles of sustainable development within the local context, championing a bottom-up approach that prioritizes local knowledge, participation, and ownership. It emerged as a critical response to top-down development models that often failed to address the specific needs and socio-ecological contexts of local populations (Chambers, 1997). The core principle of CBSD is the empowerment of community members to become the primary actors in their own development, thereby fostering self-reliance and ensuring that initiatives are both culturally appropriate and environmentally comprehensive (Murphy, 2012). This model integrates the three pillars of sustainability, environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability, at the community level, arguing that lasting solutions can only be achieved when local stakeholders have direct control over resources and decision-making processes (Berkes, 2007; Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Ostrom, 1990). By doing so, CBSD not only aims to improve livelihoods and preserve ecosystems but also to

strengthen social capital and enhance community resilience in the face of external pressures and change (Berkes & Ross, 2013).

Kominkan foster local agency through participatory learning activities, build social capital by acting as community hubs, integrate diverse aspects of community life (culture, health, economy, environment), leverage local knowledge in program design, and enhance resilience through collective learning and action, making them natural institutional vehicles for CBSD (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Hisai & Abdellatif, 2021). Their historical evolution reflects the dynamic interplay between national policy, local needs, and the global sustainability agenda.

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative, historical-descriptive documentary analysis to examine the evolution and contemporary function of Japan's Kominkan. The methodology involved a multi-stage process to ensure transparency and credibility.

3.1 Source Selection

A systematic selection of sources was conducted, focusing on three primary categories: (1) Foundational policy documents and laws, such as the Social Education Law and key Ministry of Education notifications (e.g., the 1946 Vice-Minister's notification); (2) Seminal and contemporary scholarly literature on the history and function of social education and Kominkan (e.g., Yamamoto, 2003; Inoue, 2015) ; and (3) Gray literature and reports from national and international bodies, including UNESCO and the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO (JNCU), which situate Kominkan within global discourses on ESD and lifelong learning.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The "historical analysis framework" was applied through a dual process. First, a chronological analysis was used to trace the evolution of Kominkan functions, mapping them against Japan's major socio-economic shifts (e.g., post-war recovery, rapid urbanization, and the lifelong learning pivot). Second, a thematic analysis was applied to identify how Kominkan functions and principles (e.g., mutual learning, community-networking) inherently align with the core tenets of CBSD (e.g., local agency, social capital, resilience). To ensure credibility, findings were validated through triangulation. This involved cross-referencing and corroborating the stated policy goals (from policy documents), scholarly interpretations of their impact (from academic literature), and practical reports on their implementation (from UNESCO and municipal reports).

4. Historical Evolution: Kominkan as Adaptive Engines for Community Development

4.1 Foundational Years (1946-1959): Rebuilding from Ruin

The start of Kominkan is inextricably linked to Japan's post-war destruction. The Vice-Minister for Education's 1946 notification, 'On the Establishment and Management of Kominkans,' articulated the urgent need to "cultivate the habit of thinking independently and acting peacefully and cooperatively" among citizens (Inoue, 2015, p. 20). Kominkan were mandated as institutions to achieve this democratic ideal at the local level (town and village). Their establishment was rapid, spurred by the Social Education Law (1949), government subsidies for construction, and an initial certification system for social education personnel (Iwasa, 2010; Yamamoto, 2003).

During this period, Kominkan functions were inherently developmental and community-focused:

- **Comprehensive Service Function:** Responding to immediate needs of "production recovery, lifestyle improvement, and the promotion of town and village autonomy" (Yamamoto, 2003, p. 78). Activities included practical skills training (e.g., improving agricultural yields, hygiene practices, home economics for women), literacy programs, and cultural activities to revive local spirit.
- **Mutual Learning and Solidarity:** Emphasizing voluntary discussions among residents to solve shared community problems, fostering a sense of solidarity crucial for rebuilding fragmented communities (Inoue, 2015).
- **Accessibility:** Even amidst scarcity, the proliferation of 'signboard kominkan' or 'open-air kominkan' using existing buildings like schools demonstrated a commitment to accessibility, ensuring a presence in almost all municipalities. Hence, by April 1958, 86% of the total number of 3,701 municipalities (3,261 cities, towns, and villages) had established kominkan. There were 34,650 kominkans, including both main and branch kominkans (Yamamoto, 2003).

The National Kominkan Liaison Council (founded 1951) and national conferences facilitated knowledge sharing and standardization. This era established Kominkan as indispensable, community-owned infrastructure for basic development and democratic socialization.

4.2 Transition and Challenge (1960s): Urbanization and Shifting Landscapes

Japan's rapid economic growth and industrialization in the 1960s brought profound social change: massive rural-to-urban migration, diversification of lifestyles, and weakening traditional community bonds (Kosai, 1997; Inoue, 2015). Kominkan faced an identity crisis. In rural and depopulating areas, they often remained vital 'lifestyle centers,' providing essential social glue. In burgeoning urban areas, however, their traditional role was less clear, and they risked becoming irrelevant (Yamamoto, 2003).

Kominkan adapted by:

- Emphasizing the 'Center' Role: Shifting focus towards being a hub for bringing together diverse urban residents, facilitating connection in anonymized environments.
- Diversifying Programs: Responding to increasingly individualized and sophisticated learning needs emerging from urbanization and rising incomes (Inoue, 2015).
- Highlighting Cultural and Educational Functions: Positioning themselves clearly as facilities for learning and cultural enrichment, distinct from purely recreational spaces.

This period highlighted Kominkan's need for constant adaptation to socio-economic contexts to remain relevant community assets – a core tenet of CBSD, which requires responsiveness to changing local conditions and challenges.

43Reconstruction and Lifelong Learning Foundations (1970s): Broadening Horizons

The 1970s marked a critical turning point in Japan's approach to social education, shaped by the growing global discourse on lifelong education. Influenced by international trends and domestic social changes, Japan began to broaden its educational vision beyond formal schooling. A key milestone was the 1971 report by the Council for Social Education, which redefined social education as encompassing diverse learning activities across the lifespan. This redefinition explicitly aligned with the emerging concept of lifelong education and emphasized the importance of continuous, community-rooted learning (MEXT, 2021a). During this period, Kominkan were repositioned as essential institutions for rebuilding local community cohesion, particularly in response to the social fragmentation experienced in the 1960s (Yamamoto, 2003).

One of the most significant shifts was the reframing of social education to support lifelong learning. This new perspective required expanding both the content and methods of community learning, encouraging more participatory forms such as group-based learning and volunteer activities. At the same time, alternative institutions such as culture centers and university extension programs began to flourish, offering different models of community engagement. However, Kominkan distinguished themselves by grounding their programming in community needs and maintaining a strong emphasis on fostering social solidarity. In contrast to the culture centers' focus on the 'culture of daily life,' Kominkan explicitly sought to contribute to broader community development goals (Yamamoto, 2003).

This decade also saw the beginning of conceptual and functional reconstruction within Kominkan as they moved beyond their original post-war educational mission. They increasingly engaged in discussions around the role of social education facilities in community empowerment, exploring how such institutions could serve as platforms for learning societies. These developments laid the conceptual groundwork for later approaches to CBSD, positioning Kominkan as both educational and social catalysts in their local contexts.

4.4 Embracing Lifelong Learning and Networking (1980s-1990s): Pivoting Towards Integration

The 1980s solidified Japan's commitment to lifelong learning. Key reports (Central Council for Education, 1981; National Council on Educational Reform, 1984) and the 1990 Law on the Development of Systems for Promoting Lifelong Learning provided a robust policy framework (Yamamoto, 2003; MEXT, 2021b). Kominkan were reimagined as core facilities within this system.

Their functions evolved significantly:

- **Beyond Direct Provision:** While continuing classes and lectures, Kominkan were tasked with enhanced roles in “liaison, coordination, and evaluation” within the lifelong learning network (Yamamoto, 2003, p. 85).
- **Networking Hub:** Kominkan became crucial social nexuses for connecting educational institutions (schools, universities), local government, NGOs, NPOs, and citizen groups. This network-building function facilitated knowledge dissemination and mobilized community participation – essential for integrated CBSD (Inoue, 2015).
- **Addressing Contemporary Issues:** Reports explicitly called for Kominkan to address themes like recurrent education, volunteer support, youth activities, and contemporary social issues (MEXT, 2021b).
- **Facing Fiscal Reality:** The abolition of national construction subsidies in 1997 forced municipalities to prioritize locally relevant facility development and operation models, increasing pressure for efficiency and demonstrable community value (Yamamoto, 2003).

This era marked Kominkan's transition towards being integrated community hubs focused on learning, connection, and addressing contemporary challenges.

5. Human Resources: Staffing the Engine of Community Development

The effectiveness of Kominkan in fulfilling their diverse functions, including CBSD, hinges significantly on their human resources, a structure that presents both opportunities and challenges. The Social Education Law (amended 1959) stipulates that Kominkan staff, led by a director (*Kominkan-Shuji*), are responsible for implementing facility programs, while a manager (*Kominkan-Cho*) oversees administration and planning (NIER, 2018). Staff are crucial for understanding local needs, designing relevant programs, providing learning consultation, fostering group activities, and building partnerships, making their role inherently facilitative and community-liaison oriented (Inoue, 2015).

In fact, the staffing model is dominated by part-time roles. Most of Kominkan lack a full-time Director (Inoue, 2015). The typical staffing arrangement involves a small number of municipal employees, such as a manager and sometimes a director, supplemented by numerous part-time lecturers, facilitators, and volunteers, resulting in

an average of less than one full-time staff member per Kominkan. While the Standards for Kominkan mention that staff should have social education knowledge and experience, formal qualifications are not strictly mandated. Consequently, capacity development relies heavily on training provided by prefectural and national bodies, such as the National Kominkan Association. Developing professional competence, especially for part-time Directors who are responsible for managing entire facilities, remains an ongoing challenge (Inoue, 2015; Sato, 2016).

Despite these difficulties, the reliance on local part-time staff and volunteers offers potential advantages for CBSD. These individuals often possess deep local knowledge and networks, which are crucial for understanding community sustainability challenges and building trust. Their involvement fosters a sense of community ownership and relevance, and volunteers can bring diverse skills and perspectives from various professional backgrounds. However, effectively integrating complex CBSD and ESD approaches requires significant facilitator skill in participatory methodologies, systems thinking, and project management. The part-time, often under-resourced nature of Kominkan staffing can hinder the consistent, high-quality delivery of these sophisticated programs and limit strategic networking capacity. As such, securing and training competent personnel, particularly that adept at facilitating community-led sustainability initiatives, remains a critical issue (Inoue, 2015).

Table 1
Kominkan Staffing Scenarios

Scenario	Typical Staff Composition	Prevalence
Most Common	Kominkan Manager (<i>Kominkan-cho</i>) + Kominkan Staff	High
Less Common	Kominkan Manager (<i>Kominkan-cho</i>) + Kominkan Director (<i>Kominkan-shuji</i>) + Kominkan Staff	Medium
Exceptional	Kominkan Manager (<i>Kominkan-cho</i>) + Social Education Supervisor (<i>Shakaikyoiku-shuji</i>) + Kominkan Staff	Low

6. Kominkan as Hubs for Community-Based Sustainable Development and ESD

The current paper argues that the historical trajectory and core functions of Kominkan highlights that they are facilities for not only fostering mutual learning, building social cohesion, responding to local needs, and acting as networking hubs, but also providing a natural foundation for contemporary CBSD. This alignment has become increasingly explicit, particularly through the integration of ESD.

The functions and operational philosophy of Kominkan exhibit a strong alignment with the principles of CBSD, both inherently and through explicit adoption of related frameworks. Inherently, Kominkan's traditional approach resonates with CBSD's core

tenets. Their programs typically stem from participatory needs assessments, a cornerstone of CBSD, ensuring relevance to community-identified issues. By facilitating interaction across generations and social groups, Kominkan build the trust and networks, or social capital, that are essential for collective action on sustainability issues (Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, their learning activities, often focused on problem-solving, empower residents to take ownership of local challenges, thereby fostering local agency (Abdellatif & Hisai, 2021). This is complemented by a holistic approach that often integrates cultural, social, economic, and, increasingly, environmental dimensions, while their widespread presence is designed to ensure accessibility and inclusion for diverse community members.

This inherent alignment has been strengthened by an explicit embrace of ESD and DRR. The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and the subsequent Global Action Programme provided a significant impetus for Kominkan to be recognized as key platforms for ESD in Japan (Okayama Municipal Kominkan, 2014) that consequently promotes sustainability awareness effectively (Abdellatif, 2025). The Japanese National Commission for UNESCO (JNCU) explicitly highlighted this role, citing pioneering examples like the Kyoyama Kominkan's environmental activities and the Okayama ESD Project, which leveraged Kominkan as central hubs in a regional network (JNCU, 2015). The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami profoundly solidified their role in sustainability. Many Kominkan transformed into vital emergency shelters and coordination centers, and in the aftermath, became focal points for community-based DRR planning, training, and memorialization, thereby cementing their function in building community resilience (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Makino, 2018; Shaw & Takeuchi, 2012). Consequently, many Kominkan now offer programs explicitly framed as ESD and act as catalysts for local networks, facilitating networking (JNCU, 2015, p. 16) that bring together schools, NGOs, businesses, and local government for sustainability initiatives.

Beyond formal programs, Kominkan serve crucial CBSD functions as multi-functional hubs. Most of their usage involves community groups, such as NPOs and neighbourhood associations, renting space, which provides the essential physical infrastructure for civic organization and local initiatives (Inoue, 2015). They also function as informal meeting grounds where casual social interactions build community cohesion and enable collaboration on local issues because most of Kominkan activities are classified into "cultural and social activities or community development activities" (Abdellatif, 2021, p. 29). This role as a neutral and accessible venue allows them to be effective spaces for communities to gather, discuss local challenges ranging from waste management to aging populations, and collaboratively seek solutions.

7. Discussion: Resilience, Adaptation, and Challenges in the CBSD Role

The development of Kominkan from centers for post-war reconstruction to important contributors to CBSD reflects their strong institutional resilience and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Several key factors have supported this evolution. One

important factor is their close connection to local communities. Because Kominkan are located within neighborhoods and are designed to respond to local needs, they remain relevant and trusted by residents. This local presence encourages a sense of ownership and participation among community members.

Another important strength of Kominkan is their ability to adjust their functions. Over the years, they have responded to shifts in national policy, such as the promotion of lifelong learning and ESD, as well as to social changes like urbanization, population aging, and natural disasters. This flexibility has helped them stay meaningful and useful in different contexts. In addition, Kominkan have increasingly taken on the role of community networking hubs. This means they are well positioned to bring together various stakeholders to work on complex sustainability issues that require cooperation across sectors.

Government policy has also played a significant role, although support has changed over time. In the early years, national policies and funding were strong and helped establish Kominkan across the country. In more recent years, support has depended more on local governments, which can vary in their commitment. However, national frameworks such as the Social Education Law, the Lifelong Learning Promotion Law, and ESD-related policies still provide an important foundation that legitimizes the work of Kominkan.

Despite these positive qualities, Kominkan continue to face several challenges. One major issue is limited human resources. Many Kominkan rely heavily on part-time staff and volunteers. While this helps them stay connected to local needs, it can make it difficult to carry out tasks that require advanced planning, long-term coordination, and skilled facilitation. To address this, there is a need for greater investment in staff training and more stable employment structures. Another challenge is balancing multiple roles. Kominkan serve as learning centers, meeting spaces, rental facilities, and ESD promoters. This wide range of activities can make it difficult to maintain a clear focus and may lead to confusion about their main mission. Regular strategic reviews can help clarify priorities and strengthen their CBSD contributions.

Measuring the impact of Kominkan activities is also a concern. While participation numbers are commonly used, they do not fully show how these activities contribute to sustainable development. More effective tools and methods are needed to assess outcomes in a meaningful way. Lastly, Kominkan often face competition for resources from other local institutions such as libraries and cultural centers. Limited municipal budgets may reduce the funding available for Kominkan, especially for programs directly related to CBSD. Overcoming these challenges will be essential for Kominkan to continue playing a strong role in promoting sustainability within communities.

8. Conclusion: Kominkan as a Global Model for Sustainable Community Learning

This analysis demonstrates that Kominkan are far more than simple community halls. Born from the urgent need for democratic renewal and community rebuilding after

World War II, they have evolved into sophisticated, multi-functional institutions uniquely positioned to drive community-based sustainable development. Their history reveals a consistent core mission: empowering individuals and strengthening communities through accessible, participatory learning and social connection.

Kominkan's strength lies in their deep community roots, inherent flexibility, and ability to function as social infrastructure that fosters agency, builds social capital, and facilitates collective action. Their explicit integration of ESD and DRR in recent decades marks a significant evolution, aligning their historical mission with the paramount global challenge of sustainability. Examples like Kyoyama Kominkan and the Okayama ESD Project illustrate their potential as central nodes in local sustainability networks.

However, realizing their full potential as CBSD engines requires addressing critical challenges, most notably the capacity limitations stemming from staffing structures dominated by part-time roles. Strategic investment in developing the professional competencies of Kominkan staff, particularly in participatory facilitation, ESD methodologies, and network management, is paramount. Furthermore, municipalities and national policymakers must recognize and resource Kominkan explicitly for their vital role in fostering sustainable, resilient communities.

In offering the Kominkan as a global model, it is useful to contrast it with other community learning infrastructures. While many European community centers or North American public libraries excel at providing social services or access to information, the Kominkan model is uniquely characterized by its dual function. It is simultaneously a grassroots, community-owned space and an official institution for non-formal education. This formal legal and administrative link, combined with its programmatic flexibility, creates a robust framework for implementing coordinated, community-wide initiatives like CBSD and DRR in a way that purely voluntary hubs or information-focused libraries may find difficult to sustain.

In an era grappling with climate change, social fragmentation, and economic uncertainty, investing in such accessible, community-owned learning centers is not merely educational policy; it is a fundamental development strategy. Kominkan stand as a testament to the enduring power of community-based learning as a foundation for building just, resilient, and sustainable societies. Future research should focus on detailed case studies of Kominkan-led CBSD initiatives and robust methodologies for evaluating their long-term impact on community sustainability indicators.

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