

Political shifts toward family farming and agroecology in Japan? The impact of United Nations campaigns

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Abstract – In recent decades, several United Nations (UN) organizations have made efforts to change global agri-food policies from a model promoting corporate industrial farming to one advocating agroecological family farming. This shift has garnered support from some of the UN's most active member countries, farmer organizations, civil society, and academia. However, not all UN member countries have adopted agroecological family farming homogeneously or simultaneously. Many nations and transnational corporations have sought to counter these campaigns to further their own interests, as was evident at the UN Food System Summit held in 2021. By focusing on the case of Japan, the fourth largest economy in the world with over one million farms, and employing a political economy approach, this study analyzes the impact of the UN's campaigns on family farming and agroecology on agri-food policies, stakeholders' behaviors, and discourses in the country. It also examines the measures taken by the Japanese government to curb these campaigns, in favor of preserving conventional models both domestically and internationally. Our analysis is based on literature, public documents, statistics, and participant observations conducted from 2014 to 2023. The findings reveal that, despite the majority of Japanese farms being family farms, the government has promoted corporate farming and highly mechanized operations with new technologies. However, the launch of the UN Decade of Family Farming in 2019 has gradually gained recognition and influenced discourses and behaviors among stakeholders. Simultaneously, the government's new agri-food policies and its active role in shaping the summit and international rulemaking have impacted these international campaigns.

Keywords: Family farming / agroecology / agri-food policies / Japan / United Nations campaigns

Résumé – Des virages politiques vers l'agriculture familiale et l'agroécologie au Japon ? L'impact des campagnes de l'Organisation des Nations unies. Au cours des dernières décennies, plusieurs organismes des Nations unies (ONU) se sont efforcés de faire évoluer les politiques agroalimentaires mondiales d'un modèle promouvant l'agriculture industrielle vers un modèle prônant l'agriculture familiale agroécologique. Ce changement a recueilli le soutien de certains des pays membres les plus actifs de l'ONU, des organisations paysannes, de la société civile et du monde scientifique. Cependant, l'adoption de l'agriculture familiale agroécologique par les pays membres de l'ONU n'a été ni homogène ni simultanée. De nombreux pays et sociétés transnationales ont cherché à contrer ces campagnes pour promouvoir leurs propres intérêts, comme l'a montré le Sommet des Nations unies sur les systèmes alimentaires tenu en 2021. En se concentrant sur le cas du Japon, quatrième économie mondiale qui compte plus d'un million d'exploitations agricoles, et en employant une approche d'économie politique, cette étude vise à analyser l'impact de ces campagnes de l'ONU sur les politiques agroalimentaires, les comportements des parties prenantes et les discours dans le pays. Il examine également les mesures prises par le gouvernement japonais pour freiner ces campagnes, de façon à préserver des modèles conventionnels dans le pays et sur la scène internationale. Notre analyse est basée sur la littérature, des documents publics, des statistiques et des observations participantes de 2014 à 2023. Les résultats révèlent que, bien que le Japon compte principalement des exploitations familiales, le gouvernement a encouragé l'agriculture d'entreprise et les opérations hautement mécanisées utilisant des nouvelles technologies. Cependant, le lancement en 2019 de

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la Décennie des Nations unies pour l'agriculture familiale a progressivement suscité l'attention et a influencé les discours et les comportements des parties prenantes. Simultanément, les nouvelles politiques agroalimentaires du gouvernement et son rôle actif dans la préparation du sommet sur les systèmes alimentaires et l'élaboration de règles internationales ont eu un impact sur ces campagnes internationales.

Mots clés : Agriculture familiale / agroécologie / politique agroalimentaire / Japon / campagnes des Nations unies

1 Introduction

In recent decades, several United Nations (UN) organizations, along with some of its most active member countries, farmer organizations, civil society, and academia, have made international efforts to transition global agri-food policies from a model that promotes corporate industrial farming to one that advocates agroecological family farming (FAO, 2018; FAO and IFAD, 2019; HLPE, 2013; 2019; IAASTD, 2009; Loconto and Fouilleux, 2019; McKeon, 2015; Sourisseau, 2015; UNCTAD, 2013). Among these efforts are the 2013 agreement to promote agroecology between the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and La Via Campesina, an international peasant organization, the 2014 International Year of Family Farming, the adoption of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants) in 2018, and the launch of the UN Decade of Family Farming in 2019.

However, these efforts are not uniformly or simultaneously embraced by all UN member countries. For example, while an increasing number of countries in the Global South have established National Action Plans following the UN Decade of Family Farming framework, the majority of countries in the Global North remain less involved (World Rural Forum, 2022). Many nations and transnational corporations are attempting to curb these campaigns for their own advantage, as witnessed at the UN Food System Summit held in 2021 (Maharjan *et al.*, 2022; Sekine, 2021a). Japan, the fourth largest economy in the world with more than one million farms, serves as an appropriate example for analyzing this phenomenon, as its government has recently mentioned family farming and attempted to curb the UN's agri-food policies to preserve the interests of corporate industrial farming.

2 Literature review and research questions

2.1 Theoretical perspectives from political economy and sociology

The theory on the international political economy of agriculture and food explains that the dominant agri-food systems, which were highly coordinated by interventionist nation-states, underwent radical reforms due to neoliberalism, the new dominant ideology, and the political-economic strategy that emerged in the late 1970s (Bonanno and Busch, 2015). In contrast to the Keynesian interventionist tenets of agri-food policies, the post-Fordism forms of these policies favor the free functioning of the market, the presence of corporations, and cost-cutting behaviors that are considered desirable for all stakeholders. Similarly, the literature on the sociology of food and agriculture indicates that these neoliberal reforms brought about the substitution of capital for labor, larger farm sizes, and the

deterioration of agro-biodiversity (Carolan, 2012). Although the exploitation of natural and human resources undermines the stable accumulation of capital and creates a legitimacy crisis for the neoliberal regime (Habermas, 1975), the lack of significant anti-system propositions and the co-optation of opposition and alternative discourses from the left by dominant corporations and centrists and conservative forces enable the persistence of global neoliberalism (Bonanno, 2017).

2.2 Emerging farming models: their definitions and correlations

Under the UN campaigns that address the conflict between the post-Keynesian neoliberal ideology and the efforts to transcend its negative outcomes, there are new propositions of farming models that contribute to sustainable development goals. This section examines the definitions and correlations of these emerging farming models that are discussed in this article, including family farming, agroecology, organic agriculture, and Climate Smart Agriculture, focusing on the situations in Japan.

First, family farming has been defined differently by various actors. While scholars emphasize its internal diversity (Sourisseau, 2015), the FAO defines it as “a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral, and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family and is predominantly reliant on the family labor of both women and men. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve, and combine economic, environmental, social, and cultural functions” (FAO, 2013). However, the concrete figures of family farming are difficult to capture or compare across countries due to the lack of statistical data on agricultural labor, such as the Annual Work Unit or its data cross-validation with other variables in many countries. Consequently, governments employ alternative definitions of family farming, as seen in the case of Japan (see section 4). In the UN's campaigns for sustainable development, family farms play a crucial role in realizing sustainable food systems (FAO, 2020).

Second, agroecology has also been defined differently by various stakeholders (FAO, 2024). It has been widely recognized as the application of ecological concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agroecosystems, or the science of sustainable agriculture (Altieri, 1995; Gliessman, 1990). However, its definition has evolved over time to encompass “the integration of research, education, action, and change that brings sustainability to all parts of the food system: ecological, economic, and social” (Gliessman, 2018). Agroecology contains three primary aspects: science, practice, and social movement, encompassing not only technical and biological elements, but also a political element closely related to food sovereignty and agrarian reforms that benefit smallholders (Rosset and Altieri, 2017).

Building on these studies, the FAO defined agroecology as incorporating the following 10 elements: diversity, synergies, efficiency, resilience, recycling, co-creation and sharing of knowledge, human and social values, culture and food traditions, responsible governance, and a circular and solidarity economy (FAO, 2018). The cooperation between FAO and La Via Campesina, an international peasant organization, for promoting agroecology in 2014, illustrates the UN's efforts to promote sustainable agriculture and food systems by emphasizing the importance of agroecology and family farming. However, in Japan, the notion of agroecology remains relatively unknown among agri-food stakeholders, politicians, journalists, and even scientists in recent years. Therefore, there is no official definition of institutionalized agroecology, but this does not suggest the absence of agroecological practices in the country.

Organic agriculture, however, has gained more visibility in Japan than agroecology. Following the Codex definition, the Japanese government defines organic foods as being free of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and genetically modified organisms, as well as produced under conditions with as little environmental impact as possible under the revised Act on Japanese Agricultural Standards since 2001. While several aspects of organic agriculture, including practices and social movements, overlap with those of agroecology, organic agriculture has been criticized for being co-opted by agri-food industries and conventionalized under diluted standards (Guthman, 2004). Learning from the experiences of the evolution of organic agriculture, agroecology was carefully defined to avoid being colonized by mainstream stakeholders (Maharjan *et al.*, 2022).

Although Climate Smart Agriculture, an approach to effectively respond to climate change in agricultural systems, shares some technical similarities with agroecology, the former incorporates technologies adopted in industrial farming, such as agro-chemicals, genetically modified crops, and large-scale monoculture plantations (Pimbert, 2017). Therefore, agroecology and Climate Smart Agriculture “are not interchangeable concepts nor practices that can easily coexist” (Pimbert, 2017). Similarly, organic agriculture cannot be equated with agroecology. Despite the perceived common practices and social movement directions between them, the tenet of agroecology emphasizes diversity contrary to monoculture organic farming certified under organic labeling schemes, for instance.

2.3 Research questions

Building on the above-mentioned theoretical perspectives, Sekine and Bonanno (2016) examined the neoliberalization of Japanese agriculture under the second Abe administration (2012–2020) and the resistance to it that emerged among stakeholders. Promising a departure from neoliberalism, the Kishida administration (2021–Present) claims to reorient its agri-food policies in favor of diversified farms, including medium and small-scale farms, and promote organic farming. However, recognizing the lack of anti-system propositions and the possible co-optation of alternative discourses as argued in the literature, the following research questions arise:

- Can the UN campaigns that promote agroecological family farming as a sustainable form of the agri-food system impact neoliberal policies at the national level, and if so, how?
- Which actors participate in or oppose these campaigns, and what are their objectives?

By employing the case of Japan and a Political Economy and Sociology approaches, this study aims to analyze the impact of the UN's campaigns on family farming and agroecology on agri-food policies and stakeholders' behaviors and discourses in the country, as well as the Japanese government's actions to curb these campaigns toward the preservation of conventional models domestically and internationally.

3 Methodology

To address the above-mentioned research questions, participant observations were conducted from 2014 to 2023, in addition to literature reviews, including grey literature such as public documents and statistical analyses. For the statistics analyses, this study mainly employed the Agricultural Census conducted by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) every 5 years in Japan, as well as the National Diet Proceedings Search System, and the National Institute of Informatics, both made available online by the Japanese government.

As the only Japanese project team member of the High-Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) of the UN Committee on World Food Security that published a report on “Investing in smallholder agriculture for food security” in 2013, the author performed the participant observations. As a scientist and author of the report prepared for the 2014 International Year of Family Farming, the author was contacted by officials from MAFF, prefectures, and town governments, agricultural professional organizations and farmers, representatives of the Diet and town councilors, officials of private corporations, consumer cooperatives and consumers, NGOs and their officers, journalists in mass media, scientists, and others starting in 2014.

Additionally, the author has been involved in the activities of civil society organizations, including the Small and Family Farming Network Japan (SFFNJ), as one of the founders from 2017 to 2019, and the Family Farming Platform Japan (FFPJ), the successor of SFFNJ, as one of the executive board members from 2019 onward. As a member of these organizations that promote sustainable agri-food systems based on agroecology, family farming, and small-scale agriculture, the author had opportunities to communicate with the above-mentioned stakeholders from 2017. In most cases, the author conducted participant observations both as a scientist and a member of the civil society organizations, which were intertwined.

The observations were conducted during 85 conferences organized by central and regional governments, political representatives, agricultural professional organizations, consumer cooperatives, NGOs, civil society organizations, and academia from 2014 and 2023. In addition to these conferences, the author was able to communicate with various stakeholders *via* email and online meeting tools. These participant

Table 1. Historical evolution of Japanese agriculture
Tableau 1. Evolution historique de l'agriculture japonaise.

Year	Events
1930s	Masanobu Fukuoka started natural farming
1940s-1950s	Organic agriculture began Agrarian reforms created small-scale family farmers (average 1 ha/farm) Rapid economic growth (1955-1973)
1970s	Organic farming movement and community-supported agriculture (Teikei) flourished
1980s	Neoliberalization of policies under the Nakasone administration (1982-1987) Market liberalization and influx of imported agri-food products
2000s	Organic Agriculture Promotion Act enacted in 2006
2010s	Radical neoliberal reform in agri-food sector under the Abe administration (2012-2020)
2020s	Revision of neoliberal policies under the Kishida administration (2021-present)

Source: Sekine (2020), Sekine and Bonanno (2016), and Teruoka (2008).

Table 2. Numbers of farms categorized by types in Japan.
Tableau 2. Nombre d'exploitations agricoles classées par catégories au Japon.

Year	Total	Individual farms	Corporate farms	Others (farms, %)
2005	2,009,380 (100.0)	1,976,016 (98.3)	19,136 (1.0)	14,228 (0.7)
2010	1,679,084 (100.0)	1,643,518 (97.9)	21,627 (1.3)	13,939 (0.8)
2015	1,377,266 (100.0)	1,339,964 (97.3)	27,101 (2.0)	10,201 (0.7)
2020	1,075,705 (100.0)	1,037,342 (96.4)	30,707 (2.9)	7,656 (0.7)

Source: 2005–2020 Agricultural Census conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

observations enabled the author to evaluate the stakeholders' recognition, attitudes such as opposition or agreement, behaviors, employed discourses, rationalities, and so on.

4 Evolution of agriculture and related policies in Japan

Before presenting the results of the study, this section clarifies the general outlook, socio-economic, political, and historical contexts surrounding Japanese agriculture.

The Japanese archipelago is mainly constituted of four islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, with 67% of its territory covered by forests. A mountainous terrain results in approximately 40% of farms and farmland being located in these less favored areas. Situated in East Asia with a monsoon climate, over half of Japanese agricultural farms (55.5%) out of a total of 1,076,000 farms mainly produce rice as the staple food, which dominates over half of the country's farmland (55.2%) (Agricultural Census in 2020). In terms of value, livestock production accounted for 21,674 million euros (38.5% of total agricultural production), vegetables for 13,936 million euros (24.8%), rice for 8,716 million euros (15.5%), fruits for 5,770 million euros (10.3%), and others for 6,163 million euros (11.0%) in 2022 (MAFF statistics on agricultural production and income in 2023) (calculated as 1 euro = 160 JPY). The majority of the produce is consumed domestically (98%), while only 2% is exported to countries, such as the United States, the European Union, and Asia (MAFF, 2022a).

During the second half of the 20th century, Japan experienced rapid economic growth under interventionist

policies, crises, and a radical shift to neoliberalism with market liberalization and deregulation policies (Tab. 1) (Sekine and Bonanno, 2016; Teruoka, 2008). The increasing influx of imported agri-food products has rapidly replaced domestic products, resulting in a sharp decline of 38% in the calorie-based food sufficiency ratio in 2021 (MAFF, 2022b). The government legitimized its policy that favored large corporate farms, including transnational corporations, from the 2000s, as they were considered competitive in the international cost squeeze (Sekine, 2021b; Sekine and Bonanno, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the number of farms has been halved over the last 15 years, while individual farms (non-incorporated individual and family-owned farms), which are perceived as family farms by the government (MAFF, 2018), have remained dominant (96.4% in 2020) (Tab. 2). However, the polarization of the agricultural structure has become progressively evident, with farms with less than two hectares accounting for 75.5% of the total farms, cultivating 19.9% of the total cultivated farmland in 2020 (Tab. 3). Conversely, farms with more than 100 hectares, accounting for 0.2% of the total farms, cultivated 11.1% of the total cultivated farmland in the same year.

Shedding light on the socio-economic, political, and historical evolution of family farmers in Japan based on Political Economy and Sociology, family farmers—created by agrarian reform after World War II—have formed reservoirs of moderately conservative voters who have supported the Liberal and Democratic Party for decades in rural Japan (Sekine and Bonanno, 2016). Their professional organization, the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives, has played a significant role in deriving the State's support for small-scale family

Table 3. Number of farms categorized by cultivated farmland size in Japan (2020).**Tableau 3.** Nombre d'exploitations agricoles classées en fonction de la taille des terres agricoles cultivées au Japon (2020).

	Total	0	<1	1–2	2–5	5–10	10–50	50–100	>100
Farms	1,075,705	16,951	548,556	246,562	160,020	48,454	46,739	6,490	1,933
(%)	100.0	1.6	51.0	22.9	14.9	4.5	4.3	0.6	0.2
Ha	3,232,882	0	302,887	338,440	474,233	329,371	996,690	432,749	358,513
(%)	100.0	0	9.4	10.5	14.7	10.2	30.8	13.4	11.1

Source: 2020 Agricultural Census conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

farmers and sustaining the Liberal and Democratic Party as a ruling party (Jentzsch, 2021). While the second Abe administration (2012–2020) was known for its radical neoliberal reforms, the relationship between the Liberal and Democratic Party and the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives was revised, as Abe's cabinet necessitated the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives' institutional reform to embrace market mechanisms while leaving opportunities for corporations that enthusiastically requested to penetrate the agri-food markets (Sekine and Bonanno, 2016; Takahashi, 2017).

Nevertheless, the tripled number of corporate farms over the last 15 years (Tab. 2) could not absorb abandoned farmlands, which constituted approximately 10% of the total farmlands in 2015 (Sekine and Bonanno, 2016). Under the neoliberal turn in agri-food policies, over 70% of farmers were older than 65 years old in 2019 (Sekine, 2022). Despite the enactment of the Organic Agriculture Promotion Act in 2006, only 0.3% of farmland was dedicated to certified organic farming in 2020 (MAFF, 2022c). As the cross data from the Agricultural Census, for instance, between agroecology and family farming, are not publicly available, obtaining a clear picture of the relationship between them is challenging. Thus, these figures illustrate the crisis in Japanese agriculture and the legitimacy of agricultural policies, as observed by Habermas (1975). Moreover, Japan has been known for its history of natural farming, led by Masanobu Fukuoka (1913–2008), the organic farming movement led by Teruo Ichiraku (1906–1994), and Community Supported Agriculture called *Teikei*, which gained sympathizers worldwide. However, these movements have been less recognized in society under the dominant ruling party supported by the Japan Agricultural Cooperative and the business circles, which both benefit from the industrial agriculture and food systems.

5 Results: impact of UN campaigns and appropriation

In this section, the impact of the UN campaigns, including (1) the International Year of Family Farming and the associated UN report, (2) the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, (3) the UN Decade of Family Farming, on Japanese government's agri-food policies and the perceptions and behaviors of various stakeholders, as well as (4) the government's efforts to appropriate these campaigns, is demonstrated. Based on the Political Economy and Sociology measures, we analyzed the administrations' postures to the campaigns, the behaviors and

discourses of various stakeholders, as well as the statistics available on the National Diet Proceedings Search System and the National Institute of Informatics.

5.1 Impact of the International Year of Family Farming and the HLPE report

First, this study analyzed the impact of the International Year of Family Farming and the UN's HLPE report on agri-food policies, stakeholders' behaviors, and discourses in the country. When the International Year of Family Farming was launched in 2014, the Abe administration was in the midst of its radical neoliberal reform of agri-food policies. This reform resulted in (1) further market liberalization and the conclusion of mega Economic Partnership Agreements and Trade Agreement with the European Union, the United States, and other countries in the Asia Pacific region; (2) the consolidation of farmland to large-scale corporate farms and deregulation of agrarian legislation that allowed corporations to invest in the farming sector; (3) the promotion of state-of-the-art technologies in agriculture, referred to as Smart Agriculture, which included unmanned tractors, sensing and big data analyses, cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology, as well as genome editing; (4) reforms of agri-food institutions, such as the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives, and public wholesale markets that supported interventionist State agri-food policies after World War II and (5) the Cabinet's control of human resource management in the Ministries (Tashiro and Tabata, 2019; Sekine, 2021c).

In this context, the ruling party and its supporters consider family farming to be an aging, small-scale, inefficient, and disappearing form of agriculture. A MAFF official, who summarized the HLPE report on smallholder agriculture (HLPE, 2013), stated that the MAFF considered the International Year of Family Farming "a campaign for developing countries but not developed countries such as Japan," in 2014. The Japanese mass media responded slowly, except a few agricultural newspapers published by the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives group, a major conservative farmers' organization and member of the World Farmers' Organization, and a progressive peasant organization, the Japan Family Farmers Movement NOUMINREN, a member of La Via Campesina. In the Diet, the number of proceedings containing the term "family farming" did not significantly increase after the International Year of Family Farming (Tab. 4). While members of the Diet from the left non-ruling parties referred to the International Year of Family Farming, the ruling parties, the Liberal and Democratic Party and Komeito,

Table 4. Keywords discussed in the Japanese National Diet (number of proceedings).**Tableau 4.** Mots-clés discutés au parlement japonais (nombre de comptes rendus).

Keywords	2001–2005	2006–2010	2011–2015	2016–2020	2021–2023
Family Farming	46	38	39	74	72
Agroecology	0	0	0	0	15
Organic Agriculture	74	77	34	43	108
Smart Agriculture	0	0	8	93	127

Source: National Diet Proceedings Search System (<https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/>) searched on February 7, 2024, by the author.

remained reluctant to promote family farming within the framework of the International Year of Family Farming.

However, after the publication of the translated book of [HLPE \(2013\)](#) of the UN Committee on World Food Security in Japanese, many family farmers, especially those who practiced natural or environmentally friendly farming, scientists, NGO activists, journalists, and others were inspired and consequently established the following two Civil Society Organizations: the Peasant Society ([Shono Gakkai, 2023](#)) in 2015, and the Small Family Farming Network Japan ([SFFNJ, 2023](#)) in 2017. According to the information provided by the National Institute of Informatics, the number of publications including the term “family farming” in the titles or text of Japanese publications has increased since the International Year of Family Farming ([Fig. 1](#)).

5.2 Impact of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants

Second, when the 2018 UN General Assembly passed the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants by a vote (121 approved, 8 against, 54 abstained, 10 non-voting), Japan abstained, citing the concept of rights as immature ([United Nations, 2018](#)). Besides the newspapers of NOUMINREN, left parties such as the Japan Communist Party and the Agricultural Cooperative Associations immediately reported and criticized the Japanese government’s actions. However, the information was not widely disseminated among other mass media, and most remained silent afterward. According to the Japanese government and its supporters, such as [Yamashita \(2018\)](#), there are no peasants in developed countries like Japan.

5.3 Impact of the UN Decade of Family Farming

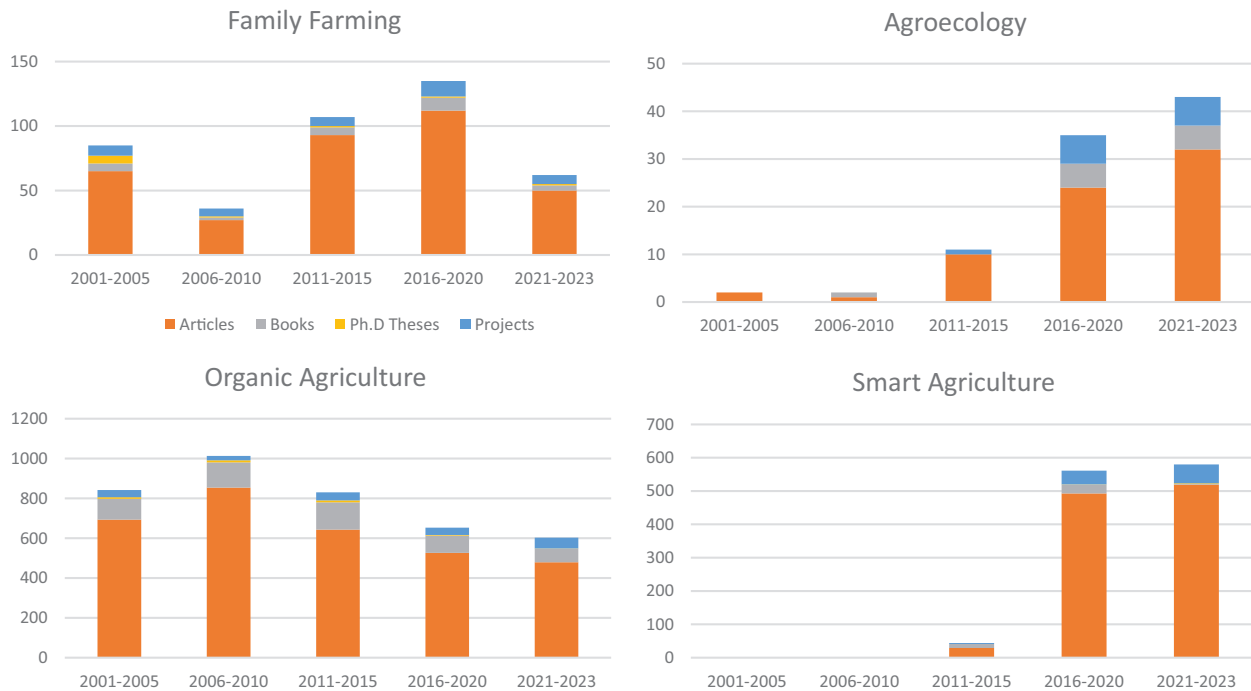
Third, the trajectory of the UN Decade of Family Farming campaign in Japan differed from that of the International Year of Family Farming and the UN Declaration. The Japanese government endorsed the UN General Assembly Resolution on the UN Decade of Family Farming in 2017, and MAFF opened its focal point before the official launch of the UN Decade of Family Farming in 2018 ([MAFF, 2018](#)). A prefectural official informed the author that this conveyed a significant message to local governments supporting family farming. It is the official position of the MAFF that it has been supporting family farming through existing policies and will continue to do so.

However, the definition of family farming, which is “a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries,

pastoral, and aquaculture production managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labor,” as defined under the UN campaign ([FAO, 2013](#)), was not widely acknowledged by the Japanese administration, resulting in equating the domestic statistical category “individual farms” with family farming ([MAFF, 2018](#)). Consequently, interested actors were able to interpret the term “family farming” as an industrial farming model that sought to scale up its business size and become corporatized.

The Japan Agricultural Cooperative, which was experiencing hardships in institutional reforms under the Abe administration, announced its support for the UN Decade of Family Farming and began promoting family farming in Japan in early 2019. The politically conservative Japan Agricultural Cooperative and the National Chamber of Agriculture, another Japanese member organization of the World Farmers’ Organization that is a part of the steering committee of the UN Decade of Family Farming, initiated lobbying efforts targeting the ruling parties and MAFF councils. They sponsored television programs on the UN Decade of Family Farming or family farming at Japan Broadcasting Corporation and engaged in various promotional activities. During this period, the number of National Diet proceedings ([Tab. 4](#)) and publications ([Fig. 1](#)) that included the term “family farming” increased. Furthermore, most major Japanese political parties pledged to enhance their support for family farming in the national election held in the summer of 2019.

In civil society, the SFFNJ was reorganized, and the FFPJ was established in 2019, becoming the first and only National Committee of Family Farming in Japan ([FFPJ, 2019](#)). As of February 2024, the FFPJ comprises 32 organizations, including NOUMINREN and Aino as members of the Asian Farmers’ Association. This association is a member of the World Rural Forum, comprising the steering committee of the UN Decade of Family Farming. Additionally, organic and natural farmers’ associations, including the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and Urgenci members, small forester and fisher organizations, Slow Food Nippon, a consumer cooperative, educational institutes, NGOs, and over 145 individuals such as farmers, consumers, parents, restaurant chefs, journalists, and scientists, among others, are also involved in the organization. The FFPJ has organized a series of symposia, workshops, and seminars, published several articles and books catering to various age groups, and disseminated information about the UN Decade of Family Farming, agroecology, and related global movements through television, radio programs, and social media. It is actively engaged in a broad social movement for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is a



Source: CiNii (<https://cir.nii.ac.jp/>) searched on February 7, 2024 by the author.

Fig. 1. Keywords in Japanese publications.

Fig. 1. Mots-clés dans les publications japonaises.

member of the Civil Society Organization of SDGs Japan (SDGs Japan, 2023). As a National Committee of Family Farming, the FFPJ has organized policy dialogues with MAFF as the focal point while also communicating with the offices of the FAO, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and World Rural Forum in Japan (FFPJ, 2023).

In this context, the 5th Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas was formulated by the MAFF and approved by the Abe cabinet in March 2020. It articulates that MAFF supports “diverse bearers,” including medium- and small-scale family farming, part-time farming, and those living in disadvantaged areas such as mountains (MAFF, 2020). In 2020, Taku Etoh, the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, stated, “We must accept the criticism that our policies to date have been biased toward scale expansion. Hereafter, we will support small- and medium-scale family farms.” In 2020, the subsequent Prime Ministers, Yoshihide Suga (September 2020–October 2021) and Fumio Kishida (October 2021–Present), also voiced their commitment to support “diverse bearers,” including family farmers, in their policy speeches.

Based on this shift, several existing policies were amended to become more inclusive. For instance, the Livestock Cluster Policy, which promoted large-scale industrial livestock farming, was amended in 2020 to subsidize family farms. In 2021, MAFF issued a document encouraging farmers to adopt 37 pluri-activity farming models in mountain areas, particularly targeting small-sized family farmers. In 2022, the Agricultural Land Act was amended to remove the minimum size requirement for acquiring farmland, allowing new farmers to establish small farms. In the same year, the Agricultural

Management Framework Reinforcement Act, a powerful policy tool previously used to promote the industrialization of agriculture, was amended, and enforced in the following year to permit municipalities to support medium- and small-scale family farmers, including part-time farmers, to sustain local agriculture. Against this backdrop, a crisis in agriculture emerged under the current policy, revealing its legitimacy crisis.

However, the ambiguous Basic Plan also retained neoliberal principles: further market liberalization and promotion of agri-food exports, consolidation of farmland, and corporatization of farms. Simultaneously, it promoted the use of state-of-the-art technologies and environmentally friendly farming practices, such as organic farming. In ongoing political debates, family farmers are often seen as entities requiring public support to transform into large corporate farms and to leverage smart technologies to compete internationally. Alternatively, they provide the labor force necessary to maintain the productive assets of large-scale corporate farms, performing tasks such as mowing weeds and cleaning waterways (Sekine, 2021d).

5.4 Appropriation of UN campaigns

In September 2021, the first UN Food System Summit was held in New York and online to “set the stage for global food systems transformation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030” (United Nations, 2021). However, it received considerable criticism for being heavily influenced by transnational corporations, resulting in the boycott by Civil Society Organizations such as La Via Campesina and Slow

Table 5. Keywords discussed in the Japanese National Diet and publications.**Tableau 5.** Mots-clés discutés au parlement japonais et dans les publications japonaises.

Keywords	Family farming	Agroecology	Organic agriculture	Smart agriculture
Family Farming	–	4* (4.6%)	7* (3.9%)	2* (1.0%)
Agroecology	8 (7.6%)	–	5* (4.1%)	0* (0.0%)
Organic Agriculture	12 (1.8%)	16 (2.5%)	–	18* (7.7%)
Smart Agriculture	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (0.3%)	–

Sources: National Diet Proceedings Search System (<https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/#/>) and CiNii (<https://cir.nii.ac.jp/>>) searched on February 7, 2024, by the author.

Notes: * Number of proceedings in the Japanese National Diet. Publications include articles, books, Ph. D theses, and projects.

Food, as well as scientists (The Guardian, 2021). This occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the ongoing controversy surrounding sustainable agri-food systems globally. The decision to attend or boycott the summit was made by the active members of the UN Decade of Family Farming steering committee, farmers' organizations, NGOs, and civil society organizations. While organizations such as the World Farmers' Organization and World Rural Forum participated, others, including La Via Campesina, led the boycott movement. In contrast to the former, which favored the technology and innovation proposed by transnational corporations or government technocrats, the latter rejected these approaches and promoted agroecological methods practiced by peasants and small-scale family farmers.

Following the US Agriculture Innovation Agenda in 2020 and the EU Farm to Fork Strategy in 2021, Japan's MAFF introduced its MIDORI strategy for sustainable food systems, with the notion that "innovation will enhance potentials and ensure sustainability in a compatible manner" (MAFF, 2021). This strategy aims to achieve 14 goals by 2050, including zero CO₂ emissions in the agricultural sector, a 50% reduction in pesticide usage at risk basis, a 30% reduction in chemical fertilizer usage, and an expansion of organic farming farmland to one million hectares, equivalent to 25% of the total farmland. To attain these objectives, the government passed a new legislation known as the Law Concerning Promotion of Low Environment Impact Business Activities to Establish a Food System in Harmony with the Environment in July 2022 (Public Relations Office, Government of Japan, 2023). During the September 2021 summit and the G7 Agriculture Ministers' Meeting in Miyazaki, Japan in April 2023, MAFF actively promoted its strategy for developing sustainable food systems that are compatible with the Asian climate and agricultural production systems. This showcases how MAFF envisions its significant role in shaping international regulations for sustainable agri-food systems while aiming to avoid adopting ambitious goals such as the European Union's strategy, including the target of converting 25% of farmland to organic by 2030, which could potentially become an international standard.

Japanese stakeholders differed in their evaluations of MAFF's strategy for sustainable food systems. Most conventional farmers and central and local government officials remained skeptical about its feasibility and were reluctant to become involved. However, some organic farmers and citizens

welcomed it, hoping to expand organic farming in Japan. Unfortunately, the expectations of organic farmers and citizens were short-lived. When MAFF released the strategy's interim plan in March 2021, they acknowledged that smart agriculture was the most concrete tools to achieve the 2050 goals. During the two weeks of public comment calls, there were over 17,000 comments, with 95% of them being negative, on genome editing technology (E-Gov Public Comments, 2021). Additionally, citizens criticized the strategy for not mentioning small-scale family farmers and for not valuing and fostering their knowledge. Instead of engaging in policy dialogues as a form of participatory governance, MAFF stated that it would "better explain" its policy to the public.

Therefore, the number of National Diet proceedings containing the terms "smart agriculture" and "organic agriculture" has increased significantly (Tab. 4). However, the term "agroecology" has rarely appeared in National Diet discussions, except in the most recent period. In Japanese publications, the term "agroecology" has limited presence, whereas "smart agriculture" and "organic agriculture" have more visibility (Fig. 1). While the term "organic agriculture" appears more frequently than "agroecology," "family farming," or "smart agriculture," its frequency has dropped since 2006, following the enactment of the Organic Agriculture Promotion Act. The crossword appearance of the keywords in the National Diet proceedings and the Japanese publications in 2021-2023 shows the relations among these keywords (Tab. 5). While the sets of "family farming – agroecology" (7.6% in publications) and "organic agriculture – smart agriculture" (7.7% in proceedings) appeared at a relatively high rate, other sets of "family farming – smart agriculture" and "agroecology – smart agriculture" did not appear both in publications and proceedings. Moreover, the frequency of these terms in the National Diet proceedings and Japanese publications reflects the level of concern among politicians, academia, and the media regarding these issues.

6 Discussion and conclusion

Japan's case demonstrates that the UN's campaigns to promote agroecology and family farming as forms of sustainable agri-food system gradually influenced the nation's agri-food policies by encouraging and mobilizing grassroots civil society organizations and their associates. However, the discourses from the left that promoted small-scale family

farming and agroecology were transformed by centrists and conservatives who supported the idea that family farming could become more competitive, mechanized, incorporated, expand in size, and accessible to biotechnology. Even when the country experiences crises in agriculture, food, and rural areas, the UN's campaigns are not perceived as a promising solution by all parties at the national level, revealing the complexity of the relationship between stakeholders embracing different agricultural models and the interests associated with them.

Although Prime Minister Kishida promised to end neoliberalism upon his election, the absence of an alternative system leaves ample room for its continuation. While this situation might appear to enable the persistence of neoliberal policies alongside certain environmental reforms, as highlighted in the Political Economy literature, the dialectic relationships among stakeholders do not cease, especially in the presence of legitimation crises in agri-food systems and society at large.

The 2021 UN Food System Summit created a space for dialectic relationships among stakeholders, including those who embraced and rejected the event. Having acknowledged the claims of the UN Decade of Family Farming campaign, the Japanese government has committed to support medium- and small-scale family farmers as well as organic farmers in the Basic Plan on Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas and the strategy for sustainable food systems, MIDORI. However, they did not adopt the concept of agroecology, opting instead to promote smart agriculture domestically and internationally. This approach aligns with the capital accumulation pursued by agribusinesses and corporations offering materials and services for this new form of agricultural industrialization or sustainable intensification.

In the ongoing discussions about the revision of the Basic Act of Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas enacted in 1999, the tension between agroecological family farming and smart corporate industrial farming remains a contentious issue as of winter 2023-2024. The governance by the ruling conservative parties and the technocracy suggests an unwillingness to undertake a radical policy shift. However, the grassroots movements aligned internationally, along with their collaborators in the public, private, and third sectors, may gradually challenge the existing social constructs in the long term.

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