

Why Are There so Many Dirt Fields in a Nation as Rich as Japan?

Kenji Kushida, 2003

To most foreigners who spend time in Japan, the following question becomes an intriguing one. In a nation so rich, why are so many athletic fields (soccer, rugby, football, even tennis), in schools at all levels, from nursery schools to top-ranked universities, made of dirt rather than grass? Is it simply overuse?

Here is a quick initial stab at what may prove to be closest to the truth.

In short, a combination of bureaucratic jurisdiction problems, bureaucratic incentive problems, and political incentive problems, combined with the financial structure of public and private schools and universities in Japan create a situation almost impossible to install grass-fields in schools on any reasonable scale.

The LDP survives on pork-barrel politics, allocating massive budgets to construction to maintain employment. Why are paving unnecessary roads a priority if building and maintaining grass fields might have similar pork-barrel effects? In other words, the Japanese pork-barrel system works by the LDP allocating funds to local projects which provides employment for people living in areas where there is no other real industry. People in these localities vote of the LDP because otherwise there is no guarantee that projects will come their way. Lots and lots of money goes to these projects – so isn't it obvious that making and maintaining costly grass fields would be a good way to make people happy, feel like modernizing progress has happened, and be grateful to the LDP for raising their quality of life, while employing the same construction people?

I think that the answer lies in the structure of bureaucracies and political incentives in Japan. The strong political ties of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport, and the bureaucratic interests of keeping money flowing through the ministries to keep them important, and their lack of jurisdiction over schools prevents them from proposing projects to make grass fields. The system works as follows: When bureaucrats in this ministry become retirement age, they find employment in private firms that benefit from the various construction projects the ministries are in charge of. Known as amakudari, this practice allows firms to access project funding by having former officials in their company who have ties to current officials in the ministry, and provides lucrative post-retirement posts for bureaucrats. The lynchpin of this system is that a great deal of money flows through this ministry, which have the final say in how they are allocated. Without the flow of funds, the ministries would not be as powerful, firms would not be interested in cozy relations with the ministry, and officials would not have post-retirement positions. Therefore, this Ministry do not want to see a decrease in the funds they are allocated for projects.

Now, the problem is that the Ministry of Education has jurisdiction over schools and universities. If the Ministry of Construction tried to raise a project over schools, the Ministry of Education would likely oppose, since their authority rests on control of

schools. If the Ministry of Infra/Transport began to exercise authority over say, school buildings as well, the Ministry of Education's control over schools would diminish. Thus, "tatewari gyosei," the vertical division of jurisdiction, is quite common in Japanese bureaucracies (in bureaucracies in general, actually.)

In the same vein, the Ministry of Education cannot obtain huge budgets to construct grass fields because they would likely be taking money from the Ministry of Infra/Transport. We know why the Ministry of Infra/Transport would not be happy with this. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education is likely to insist that to be fair, all schools need to get grass fields at once, or at a staggered schedule using a "fair" measure such as population. But the projected budget for such a sudden, massive project is likely to be seen as implausible at a time where Japan's budget deficit continues to widen.

Budgets of both public and private schools and universities are very dependent on the Ministry of Education. Budgets of public schools are closely controlled by the MoE. Private schools are also dependent on the MoE because they receive substantial support through subsidies and taxes – so most Japanese private schools are nowhere near as expensive as US private schools – but they are also much poorer. Relative lack of expertise in grass and field construction also one factor making the construction of and maintenance of grass fields extremely costly vis-à-vis most other OECD countries. (I don't have numbers, but I'm sure of this.)

Politicians are also less likely to be interested in installing grass fields if they are seen by the electorate as a waste of tax money. While most construction projects are actually a waste of money, the vested interests, such as local construction firms may not see them as such. Furthermore, since some of the vested interests are cement and concrete-related suppliers, and since the expertise of most construction firms is not in installing grass fields, proposals to install grass fields do not help the existing, entrenched interests economically. Therefore, grass fields do not fit within the political choice options of politicians.

Thus, the prospect for grass fields in Japan looks grim. However, as seen by the world cup stadium building frenzy, which was accompanied by the construction of a plethora of world-class training fields all over the country, if enough money is channeled through the Ministry of Infra/Construction for municipal projects, grass fields may start appearing in local sports facilities, though not in schools.

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