



## **Yohei Sasakawa's Major Works with The Nippon Foundation** **Toward an Inclusive Society**

Yohei Sasakawa is chairman of The Nippon Foundation, a private, non-profit foundation established in 1962 for the purpose of carrying out philanthropic activities, using revenue from motorboat racing.

Sasakawa joined the foundation as a trustee in 1981, served as president from 1989 and became chairman on 1 July 2005. The foundation's overall objectives include assistance for humanitarian activities and global maritime development. Its philanthropic ideals embrace social development and self-sufficiency, and it pursues these principles by working to improve public health and education, alleviate poverty, eliminate hunger and help the disabled.

Yohei Sasakawa himself has dedicated his life to realizing an inclusive society in which those who are marginalized and isolated for whatever reason are embraced and accepted. Sasakawa is a firm believer in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, namely: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." For Sasakawa, any type of stigma, prejudice and discrimination that results in marginalization and forcible isolation of people from society is unacceptable.

Over the decades he has initiated numerous humanitarian aid activities through The Nippon Foundation in order to provide opportunities to those who would not otherwise have them and has worked to shape a society in which no one is left behind.

Two areas of work, in particular, are testament to his commitment and devotion: his fight to eliminate leprosy from the world, and his efforts to better the lives of persons with disabilities.

### **Elimination of Leprosy**

The global spread of COVID-19, and the stigma and discrimination it has provoked against patients, their family members and the health workers who come into contact with the disease, are extremely serious challenges for humanity. The fear generated by myths and misperceptions about communicable diseases, and the social stigma and discriminatory behavior caused by that fear, have been a feature of human society throughout our history—and the most symbolic example is the stigma and discrimination faced by persons affected by leprosy. To fight against COVID-19 discrimination, there is much we can learn from global efforts to erase the stigma attached to leprosy, a mission to which Sasakawa continues to devote his life.

For over 40 years, Yohei Sasakawa has been closely involved in efforts to eliminate leprosy, working in close cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO), governments, international organizations and NGOs, and organizations of persons affected by leprosy. Since 1975, The Nippon Foundation and its sister foundation Sasakawa Health Foundation have supported measures against leprosy around the world, channeling around US\$190 million through the WHO. A prime example of this was The Nippon Foundation's funding of free multidrug therapy (MDT)—the standard treatment for leprosy—for every patient in the world between 1995 and 1999 to accelerate the WHO's efforts to eliminate the disease as a public health problem. Since MDT first became available in the 1980s, some 20 million people have been cured of the disease.

Sasakawa has described the elimination of leprosy, one of the oldest diseases known to humankind, as his life's work. Up until the novel coronavirus pandemic, he was spending up to one third of every year traveling around the world as WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, a position he has held since 2001.

As Goodwill Ambassador, he has initiated a campaign to end discrimination and other human rights violations faced by tens of millions of persons affected by leprosy and their families around the world. He approached the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to have leprosy taken up as a human rights issue and his advocacy led the then United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights to pursue the issue. In recognition of his contribution, Sasakawa was in 2007 appointed as the Japanese Government Goodwill Ambassador for the Human Rights of Persons Affected by Leprosy.

In response to a subsequent appeal by Sasakawa, the Japanese government submitted a draft resolution on "Elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members" to the UN Human Rights Council. The resolution was cosponsored by 59 countries and unanimously adopted by the Council's member states on June 18, 2008. On the basis of this resolution, the Council's Advisory Committee worked out a set of principles and guidelines for eliminating discrimination. A resolution approving the principles and guidelines was adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in September 2010 and subsequently by the UN General Assembly in December. This was a truly historic development, and it was made possible in large part by the persistent efforts of a private individual: Yohei Sasakawa.

This was not the end of the story. The Japanese government and The Nippon Foundation led by Sasakawa approached the UN Human Rights Council to request that the Advisory Committee conduct further study on the situation in leprosy-endemic countries to see whether the principles and guidelines were being effectively implemented. One of the members of the Advisory Committee carried out extensive research and compiled a report recommending the appointment of a Special Rapporteur.

In September 2017, the Human Rights Council duly nominated an expert on human rights and leprosy to be the Special Rapporteur and further examine the implementation of the principles and guidelines. In 2020, the Special Rapporteur's term was extended by three years. All these initiatives have been fully supported by Sasakawa and The Nippon Foundation.

As part of his advocacy on this issue, in January 2006, Sasakawa initiated an annual Global Appeal to End Stigma and Discrimination against Persons Affected by Leprosy. The appeal, issued each year on or near World Leprosy Day on the last Sunday in January, is designed to raise

awareness of the challenges that persons affected by leprosy face and push for a solution. To date, there have been 15 appeals, supported by influential organizations including the World Medical Association, International Bar Association, Inter-Parliamentary Union and International Paralympic Committee.

Sasakawa has also actively engaged with persons affected by leprosy and their organizations and promoted their empowerment. To date, 22 such organizations have been supported by The Nippon Foundation and/or the Sasakawa Health Foundation. They include the Association of People Affected by Leprosy (APAL), which Sasakawa helped to found in India, the country with the largest population of people affected by the disease, in 2005. APAL started out as a networking organization of residents of India's leprosy colonies, later changing its name to APAL in 2013. It is focused on a number of activities including helping people affected by leprosy know and access their rights and entitlements, working for socio-economic empowerment, and combating prejudice, discrimination and rejection.

Also in India, Sasakawa established the Sasakawa-India Leprosy Foundation in 2006. S-ILF provides opportunities to persons affected by leprosy and their families, especially those living in segregated colonies, to move out of begging and dependence on donations and into self or wage employment. To ensure the sustainability of the move into a dignified livelihood, S-ILF activities focus on training and capacity building so that persons affected and their children are able to get employable skills.

Sasakawa's visits to leprosy-endemic countries have been suspended since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic but he looks forward to the day when he can resume his overseas missions. Writing in the 100th edition of the *WHO Goodwill Ambassador's Newsletter* issued in May 2020, he remarked, "My dream is for an inclusive society—one in which not only persons affected by leprosy but all vulnerable groups have a place. Hence my journey continues. Zero leprosy and zero discrimination may not be achieved in my lifetime, but I will do my best to help us get there."

See also:

["Elimination of Leprosy" page on The Nippon Foundation's website](#)

["The Global Appeal" page on The Nippon Foundation's website](#)

[Leprosy Today website \(External link\)](#)

[Sasakawa Health Foundation website \(External link\)](#)

[WHO Goodwill Ambassador's Newsletter on Sasakawa Health Foundation website \(External link\)](#)

[Sasakawa-India Leprosy Foundation website \(External link\)](#)

[Association of People Affected by Leprosy website \(External link\)](#)

[No Matter Where the Journey Takes Me, Hurst Publishers website \(External link\)](#)

[The Last Mile on the road to eliminate leprosy official website \(External link\)](#)

["Leprosy: the world's oldest human-rights issue," Nature \(March 4, 2019\) \(External link\)](#)

["From boat racing to the love of leprosy elimination," The Lancet \(February 18, 2020\) \(External link\)](#)

[A documentary film, The Last Mile - on the road to eliminate leprosy \(External link: YouTube 104 minutes\)](#)

## **Supporting People with Disabilities**

As soon as Tokyo was chosen as the host city of the 2020 Summer Olympics and Paralympics, Sasakawa saw a golden opportunity to promote an inclusive society. Under his leadership, The Nippon Foundation has provided extensive support for the games. Notably, in 2015, he invited 28 Paralympic national sports federations in Japan in need of resources to set up offices in The Nippon Foundation building, and the foundation continues to fund their operations and support their international activities.

Sasakawa's support for persons with disabilities has not been limited to sports, however. For many years, he has also been a strong advocate for persons with disabilities in the arts. Recognizing that there had to be more opportunities for artists with disabilities, he has been the driving force behind a series of arts festivals across Southeast Asia with the aim of showcasing these artists' talents.

In 2006, he began by organizing a festival in Laos and Cambodia, followed by more events over the years in Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. These featured musical and dance performances by artists with disabilities, highlighting the breadth and depth of their works. The highlight of these long-running endeavors came in 2018 when he hosted his biggest arts festivals for disabled artists to date—the True Colors Festival in Singapore—in which over 100 artists from 22 countries participated.

To coincide with the Tokyo Paralympics, postponed to 2021, he plans to organize the next True Colors Festival in the host city and expects it to be the largest event in history for artists with disabilities. Together, these two events will be an opportunity to showcase the talents of athletes and artists from around the globe with disabilities.

As with sports, people find it easy to relate to the performing arts. Sasakawa's hope is that the message of the Paralympics and the True Colors Festival will resonate worldwide with people from all walks of life, and reaffirm the importance of an inclusive society.

Sasakawa's commitment to promoting the abilities of these athletes and artists is not a new project. It has its foundations in his long years of experience in supporting persons with disabilities. For three decades under his leadership, The Nippon Foundation has established and maintained training programs for prosthetists in six South and Southeast Asian countries (Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar and Sri Lanka). These are regions that experienced violent conflict in the 1970s and 1980s. Many people were injured in fighting or by the mines that littered their lands; prosthetic limbs were absolutely critical for their rehabilitation and ability to move on with their lives.

But prosthetic limbs were not the only things necessary. Sasakawa also focused on fostering leaders within the disabled community. In line with his vision, starting in 1992, The Nippon Foundation set up scholarship programs for persons with disabilities to attend university and graduate school. Now, these scholars number over 500, and include college educators, researchers, business owners, and politicians.

The foundation has also provided funds to higher education institutes to make the necessary adjustments so that their classes are accessible to students with visual impairments. This started in 2006, when there were only about 300 students with visual impairments enrolled in higher

education across four Southeast Asian countries; now there are about 2,500 students across seven countries.

For the deaf and hard-of-hearing, the foundation established a school in 2000 in Vietnam, which was the first school taught in sign languages for the deaf in Southeast Asia. At the time, no deaf student had graduated from middle school in the country.

Sasakawa spent 20 years creating and maintaining these kinds of programs at elementary school, middle school, high school and university level. Students who graduated from these programs are now themselves teachers at these schools, educating the next generation.

## **Building Human Capacity for Our World's Oceans**

Yohei Sasakawa's fields of activity extend beyond public health and human rights. From when he became president of The Nippon Foundation in 1989, he has been actively involved in building connections with people across the globe to facilitate initiatives to protect the world's oceans.

The problems facing our oceans today are complex, multifaceted and interlinked. They include global warming, ocean acidification, depletion of fishery resources, and millions of tons of marine litter. Tackling each problem on its own is difficult and often does not result in solving the root of the issue. To increase the effectiveness of initiatives that seek to find solutions, Sasakawa—through exercising his leadership and leveraging the capabilities of The Nippon Foundation group—has been facilitating multidisciplinary human capacity development programs; he has also been working on establishing a mechanism in which The Nippon Foundation fellows emerging from these program work together to solve the problems.

Due to the scale and complexity of these problems, it will take years before we can come up with effective solutions and still more time before we reap the benefits. In the meantime, there will be changes in environmental, political, social and economic conditions as well as in the technological and other resources that are available. What is regarded as the most effective strategy today will cease to be so in a few years' time. We therefore need people who can adapt to these changes and re-evaluate and update their approaches as necessary.

Since 1988, in cooperation with the UN, international organizations, research institutions and universities, The Nippon Foundation has been establishing human capacity development programs in different fields of expertise ranging from ocean governance and maritime law to ocean observation and bathymetry. As of November 2020, 1,507 fellows from 149 countries have successfully completed their programs.

One of these is an interdisciplinary ocean research initiative, which The Nippon Foundation established in 2011. More than 30 partner institutions from around the world are now working together to further our knowledge on how to attain ocean sustainability. As of November 2020, the initiative has nurtured over 50 fellows who have gone on to marine research positions in various institutions including UN organizations and international NGOs. It has also built a global interdisciplinary network of more than 1,000 scientists who conduct collaborative research across the natural and social sciences to address the complex and multifaceted questions of ocean sustainability. The program is engaged in policy processes both at international and regional levels and has organized side events and workshops together with international organizations and

national governments at major gatherings including COP21 in Paris and the UN Ocean Conference in New York.

Sasakawa's role in bringing leading research institutions together to engage in collaborative interdisciplinary research to address the problems facing our oceans and provide the international community with evidence-based recommendations from a long-term viewpoint has been widely recognized. Furthermore, by creating an extensive academic network that covers the natural and social sciences through to policy research, Sasakawa continues to expand the scope of the multidisciplinary human capacity development model.

His thinking behind these programs is to raise a new generation of experts who will not stop at simply contributing to their own fields but who will transcend the boundaries of their expertise, institutions, nationalities, religions and cultures and work together as a diverse group to make a difference on a global scale. By engaging in initiatives to protect the oceans in different parts of the world, these experts are paving the way for a comprehensive solution. Results are already emerging, with a multinational and multidisciplinary group of fellows recently winning an international competition for unmanned technology to map the ocean floor.

The ocean is one and connected, and pays no heed to the borders created by humankind. Working to solve the problems facing the ocean encourages people to overcome their differences and work toward a common goal. With the aim of ensuring that people living on this planet one or two thousand years from now have a healthy ocean, Sasakawa continues to nurture a new generation of individuals who can adopt a broad perspective in addressing these challenges.

In recognition of his contributions to the maritime field, Sasakawa was awarded the International Maritime Prize in 2014 by the International Maritime Organization.

### **Peace Building in Myanmar**

In June 2012, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs appointed Sasakawa as its Goodwill Ambassador for the Welfare of the National Races in Myanmar and subsequently, in February 2013, as Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar, a move taken in recognition of the diverse humanitarian works performed by The Nippon Foundation in Myanmar under Sasakawa in the medical and educational fields during the past decade. Appointed to help improve the welfare of Myanmar's ethnic groups, Sasakawa believes that Myanmar's democratization cannot succeed without peace building between the government and the ethnic groups and is playing a unique and indispensable role acting as a mediator between them. Sasakawa and The Nippon Foundation continue to provide emergency relief for the internally displaced ethnic refugees of the country's civil wars and this assistance can reach those in need more quickly than official development aid. Since 2012, Sasakawa has visited Myanmar for meetings and relief work more than 100 times.

### **Work in Africa**

In 1986, The Nippon Foundation established the Sasakawa Africa Association after then chairman Ryoichi Sasakawa approached Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and father of the 'Green Revolution' in India and Pakistan, about working together to help the continent avoid famine in future.

SAA administers and manages Sasakawa Global 2000, a program through which smallholder farmers are taught modern farming methods, including the use of quality seed and small amounts of fertilizer. It has succeeded in increasing production by two to six times for the farmers that use its methods. At the heart of this program is the small-scale farmer, who has demonstrated that, given access to available technology, yields of staple food crops can be drastically increased and agriculture's value chain strengthened. Millions of farmers in 14 sub-Saharan African countries have benefited as a result.

Currently, the project focuses its operations in the four countries—Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria and Uganda—and Yohei Sasakawa believes it is possible to achieve and sustain a major expansion of both farm output and the subsequent processing and marketing of food crops.

“A lot of money has been poured into African agriculture in the past,” he says. “Results have been patchy. But we know that a sustained effort to ensure that small farmers have access to practical technology and expert knowledge can achieve a lasting transformation in agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods.

“We are trying to bring about change at the grassroots level. Our resources are needed but we also need the support of the national extension services and agricultural ministries. For us, the extension workers are key in delivering success and infusing the ‘Norman Borlaug spirit’ of working directly with farmers, standing in the fields with them.”

And this is where Sasakawa has been able to make a critical contribution, in helping states to broaden the reach of the national extension services that work with these small rural producers.

See also (External links):

[Sasakawa Africa Association website](#)

[Take it to the farmer – The Sasakawa experience in Africa \(Sasakawa Africa Association\)](#)

## **Awards**

Yohei Sasakawa's personal involvement in humanitarian aid work has earned him international recognition, including the WHO Health-for-All Gold Medal, the International Leprosy Union's Millennium Gandhi Award, the Yomiuri International Cooperation Prize and the International Gandhi Award.

Other honors include:

Rule of Law Award presented by the International Bar Association in 2014

Health and Human Rights Award presented by the International Council of Nurses in 2017

Gandhi Peace Prize for 2018 conferred by the Government of India represented by President Ram Nath Kovind on February 26, 2019

Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun conferred by the Government of Japan in May 2019

Selection as a Person of Cultural Merit by the Government of Japan in November 2019

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(as of January 2021)