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Rabbit Island's Buried Memory

How Tourism Policies Obscure Ōkunoshima's Dangerous Legacy

Abstract

Ōkunoshima, a small island in Hiroshima Prefecture, is widely known as "Rabbit Island," a tourist destination famous for its large population of rabbits. However, its history as a chemical weapons production site during World War II remains largely overshadowed, while the island's toxic legacy continues to pose health risks. This article examines the "forgetting" of the island's chemical weapons legacy, the role of tourism policies in shaping its public image, and the challenges of preserving its memory. Despite efforts by local peace activists, the dominant tourism narrative emphasizes recreation over historical awareness, leaving the broader public oblivious to the ongoing environmental and health dangers. The case of Ōkunoshima highlights the tension between economic interests, historical accountability, and human security in Japan's memory politics.

Keywords: *Ōkunoshima, Memory, Chemical Weapons, World War II*

DMITRII DUNICHEV

Ōkunoshima is a small and secluded island in Seto Inland Sea, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan. Now it is famous on social media as the "Rabbit Island," a family-friendly resort with various tourist facilities populated by nearly five hundred fluffy creatures (The Asahi Shimbun, 2025). However, during World War II, the island was a production site for Japan's chemical weapons program. It left behind a trail of poisonous legacy—buried chemical weapons—that still contaminate land and water and harm people's health all across Japan and Northern China. Despite this, the existing memory discourse surrounding the island is relatively obscure, with certain official policies implemented to conceal the dangerous legacy from the public's attention. Lack of awareness of Ōkunoshima not only undermines justice for the victims but also increases public vulnerability to ongoing threats.

> The prioritization of a "positive" image for the island—one that drives tourism revenue while avoiding uncomfortable historical truths—means that its dark legacy remains obscured, leaving visitors and the wider public unaware of the dangers that persist.

One especially infamous case of Ōkunoshima's legacy harming people's health occurred some twenty years ago. In October 2001, Miyuki Aotsuka and her family moved into a new house in Kamisu City,

Ibaraki Prefecture. Soon after, the Aotsuka family began experiencing health problems. Ryuji, the eldest son and the most severely affected, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy and left with lifelong disabilities. The cause of the problem was traced to the local well that supplied the entire community with tap water. In 2003, a government water quality survey found arsenic at a concentration 450 times higher than the national standard. The specific contaminant—diphenylarsinic acid—does not exist in nature. It had leaked from a buried concrete mass near the well, polluting the groundwater across the surrounding area. The Environmental Dispute Coordination Commission determined that the substance had likely been produced during World War II in a completely different part of the country—on the island of Ōkunoshima in Hiroshima Prefecture (Kamisu City Hall, 2019; Schumann, 2019; Tatsumi, 2022).

Although the total number of people affected by the incident remains unclear, 39 residents of Kamisu City filed a lawsuit against the national government and Ibaraki Prefecture, and 37 of them received compensations in 2012 (Pollution Adjustment Committee Secretariat, 2012; The Nikkei, 2012). Below, I will explain why weapons produced during a war that ended 80 years ago continue to pose a threat to people.

The landscape of Ōkunoshima (Photo: hermitvoita on Flickr, licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0)

After World War I, Japan, like the United States and the Soviet Union, continued developing its chemical weapons (CW) program despite the growing global consensus to ban such weapons. Due to its secluded location, Ōkunoshima was chosen as the main production site for the program. From 1929 to 1945, the island housed CW production facilities, employing up to 6,000 people and producing hundreds of tons of poisonous substances. The CWs produced on Ōkunoshima included vomiting agents, tear gases, and the infamous mustard gas, which inflicted immense suffering on its victims. These weapons were used primarily in China during World War II, where they affected up to 80,000 people (Grunden, 2005; Mitchell, 2020).

In addition to Chinese soldiers and civilians, many Japanese workers on the island—some of whom were mobilized children and volunteer women—were also exposed to the toxic substances. Many later developed severe health issues, including chronic bronchitis, cancer, skin diseases, and pulmonary emphysema. For decades, the victims had to fight the government for compensation (Higuchi, 2015).

Shortly before Japan's surrender in 1945, Japanese officials and military officers attempted to conceal evidence of the CW program. Poisonous substances produced on Ōkunoshima were buried or dumped into bodies of water across Japan and northern China, where many remain undiscovered to this day (Doglia, 2019; Embassy of the PRC, 2023).

However, this history remains largely unknown by the general public, as the island is primarily famous for its population of rabbits, which have become its main tourist attraction. This obscurity can be

attributed to several factors. First, after Japan's surrender, American military authorities sought to suppress information about the Japanese CW program for their own strategic purposes. As a result, despite ample evidence, not a single Japanese official was held accountable for the CW project at the International Military Tribunal for the Far East. This failure to criminalize the use and development of chemical weapons allowed for their near-unrestricted proliferation until the end of the Cold War, when the Chemical Weapons Convention was created (Guillemin, 2017).

The second factor was the Japanese government's effort to obscure this "guilty page" of the country's history from public memory. Although former employees of the island eventually secured compensation after decades of campaigning, Ōkunoshima never became a widely recognized memory site for Japan's wartime atrocities. This was partly due to a tourism policy initiated by Takehara City[1] in 1963, which aimed to "change the island's negative image" by transforming it into a family resort. The policy received personal approval from then-Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato, himself a native of Takehara City (Doglia, 2019).

Ruins of the power plant that once supplied energy to the CW production facilities (Photo: Steffen Flor on Flickr, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)

Now, Takehara City plays an ambiguous role in shaping the image of Ōkunoshima. On the one hand, the municipality supports the countermemory voices of local peace activists who run the Poison Gas Museum, which raises awareness of the island's wartime legacy. On the other hand, the Takehara City Tourism Bureau largely continues the policy sanctioned by Ikeda Hayato more than 60 years ago. An analysis of official websites reveals that Ōkunoshima is primarily presented as a family-friendly resort where visitors can enjoy interacting with rabbits and experiencing the island's "paradise-like" nature. The history of the chemical weapons program is mentioned only briefly, framed as a "dark history" that is disconnected from the present. This framing ignores ongoing issues, such as the contamination of land and water, even on the island itself, and distances the historical narrative from the actual victims—

[1] Okunoshima island is part of Takehara City.

not only those who suffered during World War II but also those who continue to be affected decades later due to the buried chemical weapons scattered across Japan and China.

In 2014, Ōkunoshima gained widespread social media fame, attracting domestic and international attention. As a result, visitor numbers surged several times, surpassing 400,000 in 2017 (Tomikawa, 2023). The island's image on social media was largely influenced by the "rabbit island" narrative promoted by official Japanese institutions. Studies indicate that visitors often perceive Ōkunoshima as "a natural petting zoo" or "a theme park" where entertainment takes precedence over historical awareness (Usui, 2022). According to data from Setonaikai National Park, 93% of tourists visit the island to interact with the rabbits, while only 30% mention war-related tourism (Ministry of the Environment, 2019). The director of the Ōkunoshima Poison Gas Museum, a local peace activist, offers an even lower estimate—only 10% of visitors come to learn about the island's chemical weapons legacy.[2]

A rabbit near the ruins of the power plant on Ōkunoshima (Photo: c_msmt on Flickr, licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0)

Although Ōkunoshima's fame as "Rabbit Island" brings some indirect benefits to its historical memory—after all, more tourists visiting the island means more people have the chance to learn about its past—the existing tourism policy fragments visitors' knowledge and distances the island's problematic legacy from the present. With only a small group of local peace activists working to confront this issue and the topic absent from school education, the general Japanese public remains largely unaware of Ōkunoshima's true legacy.

The founders of the Ōkunoshima Poison Gas Museum envisioned it as a true counterpart to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum—a memory site that would highlight Japan's wartime atrocities, absent from Hiroshima's narrative, and serve as an entry point into the broader history of chemical weapons (Kristof, 1995). This way, it would connect Japan to other places that have suffered from chemical warfare, such as Yemen, Vietnam, and Syria, while serving as a warning about the ongoing

[2] From a personal communication with the director of the museum during the author's fieldwork on the island in July 2024.

dangers of buried chemical weapons, ensuring that tragedies like that of the Aotsuka family are not repeated.

However, the current tourism and education policies prevent Ōkunoshima from gaining recognition as a significant war memory site. The prioritization of a "positive" image for the island—one that drives tourism revenue while avoiding uncomfortable historical truths—means that its dark legacy remains obscured, leaving visitors and the wider public unaware of the dangers that persist.

About the Author

Dmitrii is a master's student at Hiroshima University, supported by the MEXT scholarship. His research focuses on memory studies, particularly Japan's perception of nuclear energy. He is especially interested in how collective memory can promote human security and sustainability. Dmitrii previously graduated from Saint Petersburg University in Russia and studied at Kobe University in Japan as an exchange student. He has professional experience in journalism and education. LinkedIn

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Sustainable Threads

How Iran's Fashion Industry is Stitching a Greener Future

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of sustainable fashion practices in Iran, focusing on the intersection of environmental responsibility, cultural heritage, and grassroots innovation. Using the Hanas Project as a case study—an initiative addressing textile waste through eco-conscious design and women's employment—it outlines systemic challenges such as water scarcity and inadequate recycling infrastructure. It explores how Iran's fashion industry is navigating the shift toward circular economy principles. The findings highlight both achievements and persistent barriers, suggesting that the integration of cultural preservation with environmental action is contributing to a distinctive path toward sustainable fashion in the region.

Keywords: *Sustainable Fashion, Circular Economy, Textile Waste, Cultural Heritage, Iran*

ELHAM SABERI

The fashion industry is the second most polluting industry, accounting for 8% of global carbon emissions. With an anticipated 50% increase in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, it is expected to surpass the combined emissions of all international flights and maritime shipping (Bailey et al., 2022). It is estimated that one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or incinerated every second (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), and 20% of global wastewater is attributed to textile dyeing and treatment processes (UNEP, 2018). These figures reveal the fashion industry's environmental impact and emphasize the need for urgent reform (UNEP, 2018; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

In Iran, the situation is dire due to a severe water crisis exacerbated by climate change and groundwater depletion, inadequate recycling infrastructure, and smuggling in the garment sector—factors that heighten the urgency of redefining the current fashion system (Madani, 2014; 2021). Sustainable fashion in Iran combines cultural heritage with modern environmental awareness, reflecting long-standing respect for nature through both traditional practices and recent efforts promoting responsible consumption (EcoClicky, 2024). Iran's commitment to environmental stewardship may stem from the ethics and cosmology of Zoroastrianism. This ancient religion emphasizes purity, balance,

Sustainable fashion in Iran combines cultural heritage with modern environmental awareness, reflecting long-standing respect for nature through both traditional practices and recent efforts.

harmony, and gratitude between humans and nature, encouraging sustainable practices in everyday life (Foltz & Saadi-nejad, 2008; Tam, 2022).

Iran's ethnic and tribal communities produce distinctive clothing styles adapted to their local environments, using materials like handwoven wool, natural dyes, and traditional weaving techniques (Yoshida, 2002). Iranian rural women serve as cultural stewards, preserving traditional textile crafts and artisanal skills that emphasize local production and sustainability. These heritage practices provide a strong foundation for contemporary efforts to promote ethical sourcing, minimal waste, and sustainability (Rezaeizadeh, 2023).

Case Study: The Hanas Project

To examine how local initiatives in Iran are responding to sustainability reforms, I analyze the Hanas Project as a case study. Hanas demonstrates how environmental and socio-economic concerns are addressed through community-based strategies within Iran's fashion sector.

Founded by Soheila Jabri (Chia) with Khatoun Shahbazi during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project promotes sustainable fashion in Iran by integrating environmental responsibility with cultural heritage and social equity (The BRICS Women's Business Alliance, 2020; Chiamode, 2014).

In Iran, small production workshops generate over 15 million kilograms of textile waste annually, more than 90% of which is typically incinerated—contributing significantly to carbon emissions and air pollution (Trendz Magazine MENA, 2024). In response to this environmental crisis, Hanas applies circular economy principles to repurpose textile waste into clothing, accessories, furniture, and art using natural dyes, patchwork, and traditional embroidery. This approach mitigates environmental harm while preserving cultural aesthetics and creating economic opportunities (Trendz Magazine MENA, 2024).

Reused fashion waste items, Hanas Center (Image from Hanas Archive 2024, used with permission).

Hanas focuses on producing minimal waste through made-to-order and limited batches. Artisans are encouraged to reuse older materials to "designing out waste" (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). The project also promotes product longevity by offering customers incentives to return used garments for discounts or remakes.

Beyond environmental impact, Hanas emphasizes gender equity and community engagement. Women have historically played central roles in Iran's textile heritage. The Hanas project continues this legacy by centering women in its leadership and workforce. Its goal to create 3,800 jobs over five years speaks to a broader mission of inclusive, sustainable development aligned with the Sustainable

Workshop on textile sustainability (Image adapted from 2024 Hanas Internal Report, used with permission).

Textile waste from fashion producers in Iran (Image adapted from 2024 Hanas Internal Report, used with permission)

Development Goals (SDGs) of No Poverty, Gender Equality, Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Responsible Consumption and Production.

Beyond production, Hanas also invests in educational outreach. The project's Fashion and Environment Facilitation Center conducts over 1,500 hours of training across six months. These workshops aim to raise awareness about the environmental consequences of textile waste and promote sustainable fashion practices. While these activities underscore the project's commitment to public engagement, questions remain regarding their long-term impact on consumption patterns and broader behavioral change (Shahbazi, 2025).

The Hanas Project has been recognized by the Intellectual Property Organization and the Iranology Foundation for its efforts. However, Hanas continues to face challenges balancing cultural preservation with environmental sustainability.

Challenges and Limitations of the Hanas Project

The Hanas Project faces significant structural and operational challenges common in the Global South. In a May 2025 interview, Khatoun Shahbazi noted the lack of formal textile waste infrastructure, requiring reliance on informal networks and manual labor, which raised costs and limited scalability. Public perception also remains a barrier, as recycled fashion is often viewed negatively. Despite efforts in brand storytelling and education, changing consumer attitudes is a long-term challenge.

On the economic side, Shahbazi reflected on the tension between social impact and business growth, admitting that prioritizing environmental and social outcomes over profit has made it difficult to scale and attract investors. The project's production methods, while sustainable, limit its ability to meet market demands.

Internally, the project has learned valuable lessons through trial and error, such as the need for sustainability to be practical and the need for greater training and quality controls to maintain consistent production. At one point, rapid scaling efforts led to team burnout, revealing the critical need for better structural, financial, and human resource planning in social enterprises.

While Hanas continues to evolve, limitations remain. Heavy reliance on manual labor constrains production capacity and raises concerns about sustainability without automation or technological augmentation. Moreover, its hyper-local model—though socially empowering—is difficult to replicate elsewhere. Finally, current evaluations of the project's impact are qualitative; the lack of rigorous, quantitative assessments may limit academic and policy engagement in the short term.

Iran's fashion sector, as seen through initiatives like the Hanas Project, holds significant potential for advancing sustainable practices by drawing on traditional knowledge alongside

contemporary environmental approaches. Yet, efforts in this space are often constrained by fragmented policy frameworks that separate environmental protection from cultural heritage preservation (Cheraghchi, 2018). This disjointed approach, coupled with the pressures of rapid urban development that can marginalize historical and cultural sites (Asadi, 2023), complicates the scaling of sustainability initiatives. Overcoming these barriers, while also shifting public perceptions of recycled fashion, will be key to enable broader adoption. By continuing to align cultural heritage with ecological goals, Iran's fashion industry could chart a distinctive and sustainable path forward.

About the Author

Elham is an Education and Research Coordinator at NERPS, Hiroshima University, and a MEXT PhD candidate in education at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University. She holds a master's degree from the University of Tehran. A former J.F. Scholar (2013) and a 2024 alumna of UNITAR Hiroshima, some part of her research focuses on the SDGs, particularly in fashion and environmental sustainability. She has published articles in Iranian magazines and completed a writing course at the University of London's Goldsmiths. She is also an alumna of the INEI program at Beijing Normal University, where she focused on digital education, comparative research, and policy decision-making. Facebook & LinkedIn.

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Preventing the Next Pandemic

What Can Local Governments Do?

Abstract

Infectious diseases have persistently challenged governments' capacity, especially during devastating outbreaks. Over the past three decades, more than 3,000 infectious disease outbreaks have occurred, resulting in millions of deaths across the globe. This article illuminates the crucial role of local governments in mitigating Emerging Infectious Diseases (EIDs). Instead of focusing on reactive responses, this article tackles how local governments can better prepare for future pandemics by delving into the case of Davao City, the largest city by land area and among the most densely populated cities in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Infectious diseases, COVID-19, Local government, Davao City, Philippines*

ARIANNE DACALOS

MICHAEL BACUS

Infectious diseases have long posed significant threats and continually challenge governments, especially during devastating outbreaks. Over the past three decades, more than 3,000 infectious disease outbreaks have been recorded globally (Liu et al., 2025), which include Emerging Infectious Diseases (EIDs) with the highest death tolls, such as HIV, AIDS, Spanish Flu, Ebola, SARS, and COVID-19. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed over seven million lives worldwide, taught us a painful lesson never to underestimate the lethal grip of the virus. Even states with the most advanced healthcare systems struggled to contain it, emphasizing that viruses, despite their microscopic nature, could weaken not only people but also institutions.

Frontline institutions, especially the local governments, should proactively address the issue before another pandemic begins.

During the pandemic, the world witnessed how governments grappled with case isolation and mass vaccination. Some responded "proactively at best, while others were negligent at worst" (Lal et al., 2021). Five years later, scholars and practitioners are wary that it might not be the last pandemic (Feldsher, 2024; Frieden et al., 2021), as EIDs are rapidly evolving, especially with increasing ecological changes and human-wildlife interactions In short, we are still at risk of entering another pandemic era in this lifetime.

In the wake of COVID-19, many governments have been compelled to invest in healthcare institutions, streamlining universal healthcare and telemedicine, and improving medical facilities (Kodali,

2023; Lamberti-Castronuovo et al., 2022). While it presents a promising move, mitigating infectious diseases is treated with low salience, as most efforts are concentrated on managing diseases. This policy and research gap prompts policymakers and researchers to think of ways to shift from reaction to prediction. To get ahead of the next pandemic, we must first identify the hotspots to aid in long-term surveillance and EID monitoring. Scholars recognize the use of the Vulnerability Index (VI) as an assessment tool to identify and forecast areas with high economic and epidemiological risks (Macharia et al., 2020; Sands et al., 2016). This tool can inform policy choices of governments, helping them tailor interventions according to the needs of their constituents.

Day to day operations in Bankerohan Public Market, Davao City, Philippines. Photo by Frank Lloyd de la Cruz from Unsplash, https://unsplash.com/photos/people-walking-on-market-store-_1DIKCetFFk. Free to use under Unsplash license.

In decentralized countries like the Philippines, the index can be far more useful when applied in local contexts. Damgo et al. (2023) adopt this method to examine the case of Davao City, the largest city by land area and among the most densely populated cities in the Philippines. Approximately 60% of EIDs stem from animals (Otte & Pica-Ciamarra, 2021), and the recent outbreak was widely linked to wildlife, livestock, and humans in changing environments (da Costa et al., 2020). Building on these previous studies, the researchers generated a VI for the 182 barangays (neighborhoods or villages) in Davao City by adopting four indicators: population density, livestock and domestic populations, climate factors, and human-animal interactions. The findings reveal that out of 182 barangays, 61 are highly vulnerable to EIDs, located in the districts of Talomo, Tugbok, Calinan, Buhangin, and Baguio. Highly vulnerable areas are concentrated mainly in villages with larger urban green spaces, higher animal populations, and multiple wet markets, areas that could heighten the risk of human-wildlife interactions and disruption of reservoir hosts.

Rapid urbanization and increased anthropogenic activities in Davao City necessitate pragmatic biosurveillance and disease prevention policies. While the city government has initiated programs related to climate change, air quality, and environmental sustainability (Mendoza, 2022), it has yet to fully address the challenge of mitigating EIDs. To effectively tackle this issue, it is imperative to advance

local policies that could prevent the propagation of EIDs and promote convergence among governments, constituents, and non-state actors, such as the academe, civil society organizations, and the private sector. Local governments, like in Davao City, can adopt the One Health Framework to develop programs and policies for EID mitigation. One Health is a unifying framework that recognizes the interdependence of the environment, animal, and human health in achieving sustainable and optimal health outcomes (Degeling et al., 2015). It acknowledges the need for multisectoral collaboration in addressing emerging health threats and the importance of an integrated biosurveillance, risk assessment, and capacity-building interventions to build safeguards against EIDs. Localizing the framework promoted by the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Organization for Animal Health by institutionalizing it as part of a local ordinance can serve as a blueprint and guiding principle in fighting zoonotic diseases at the city-level.

Aerial view of Davao City. Photo by patrickroque01 from Wikimedia Commons, https://w.wiki/FM5q. CC-BY-SA-4.0.

Instead of fragmentarily addressing social and health problems, the local government can foster a more consolidated effort to prevent EIDs, especially at the village level. To make this work, they should first address the potential information gaps that could arise from the residents' lack of knowledge of EIDs. One way to address confusion and misinterpretation of regulations is to involve multisectoral groups in public awareness campaigns. A more durable solution is to create and integrate an EID council or a policy body that could consistently monitor and assess the situation on the ground, and inform the government's policy choices. This mechanism can enhance coordination between the locals and the government, which is vital in ensuring the success of policy implementation.

Scholars highlight that metros and urban centers are often highly susceptible to becoming an EID reservoir due to their dense population (Alirol et al., 2011; Neiderud, 2015). As a highly urbanized center, Davao City should take precautions by enforcing infectious disease surveillance and establishing strategic biosecurity checkpoints in hotspot areas for wildlife, livestock, and domestic animals to minimize disease transmission. It is crucial to revisit local policies on wet markets to reduce the risk of disease emergence, as wet markets are the most susceptible viral transmission hubs (Webster, 2004). While other countries have enacted stringent regulations (Woo et al., 2006), policies regarding sanitation and hygiene in wet markets are generally taken for granted in the Philippines (Collado et al., 2015). The city government must strictly implement these policies and, at the same time, incentivize market vendors

to adhere to the regulations on market goods handling, sanitation, and proper waste segregation to safeguard public health. Moreover, regarding commercial farms, a comprehensive review of the City Land Use Plan (where the allowed proximity of farms and residential areas is explicitly stated) and other relevant policies is necessary to minimize the risk of cross-contamination. Incorporating animal biosecurity measures such as quarantine facilities, buffer zones, perimeter control, air filtration, and other biosafety protocols into local ordinances can strengthen the regulation on farms, wet-markets, and urban green spaces, which are considered high-risk EID transmission zones.

EIDs are microscopic, and to this date, millions of people have lost their lives to these "invisible threats". Experts remind us that the fight against epidemic and pandemic diseases is not yet over; in fact, the next one could be more deadly. This call should galvanize local leaders and advocates to pursue a sound agenda and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by prioritizing health and well-being, upholding sustainable environmental policies, and fostering partnerships across sectors. No place is safe from EIDs, especially dense urban centers, which are the most vulnerable to becoming EID arenas. Without enabling policies and strong stakeholder support, these areas could potentially become the epicenter for outbreaks. Frontline institutions, especially the local governments, should proactively address the issue before another pandemic begins.

About the Authors

Arianne is a scholar and practitioner of Public Policy, specializing in local governance, politics, and Mindanao studies. She earned her Ph.D. from the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) in Tokyo, Japan, where she was consecutively awarded the ADB-JSP and MEXT scholarships for master's and PhD studies. She works on topics encompassing reform politics, grassroots and civic innovation, and local transformation, with her most recent work published in the journal, *Policy Studies.* Before pursuing doctoral studies, she worked for the Provincial Local Government of Davao de Oro in Southern Philippines, leading digital innovations and supporting advocacy programs related to zero hunger, food security, women empowerment, and public health. LinkedIn

Michael is a molecular microbiologist with particular interest in utilizing a one-health framework for the surveillance of infectious diseases and in advancing understanding of host-pathogen interactions using multi-OMICs technologies. He obtained his BS in Biology degree at the University of the Philippines Mindanao in 2018, and his MPhil in Biomedical Science at the Peter Doherty Institute for Infection and Immunity at the University of Melbourne, Australia in 2024, both through the generous scholarship provided by the Department of Science and Technology Science Education Institute (DOST-SEI). His research focuses on health and biodiversity, as well as in implementing capacity-building programs for students, researchers, and faculty in the fields of molecular biology, genomics, and bioinformatics. Google Scholar

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Building Futures Far From Home

Afghan Immigrants Navigating Life in the United States

Abstract

This article discusses how Afghan immigrants are rebuilding their lives in the United States after the 2021 fall of Kabul. Drawing on insights from A Survey of Afghan Immigrants in the United States (Kajishita et al., 2025), it highlights the everyday realities of resettlement, including housing, employment, education, and language challenges. Many Afghans came seeking safety, stability, and better opportunities for their families. Despite facing obstacles such as underemployment, limited English proficiency, and housing insecurity, they demonstrate remarkable resilience, adaptability, and a strong commitment to their new communities. The article emphasizes the importance of community-based support, language learning, and inclusive policies in helping Afghan immigrants build stable and meaningful lives in the United States.

Keywords: *Afghan immigrants, integration, resettlement, United States*

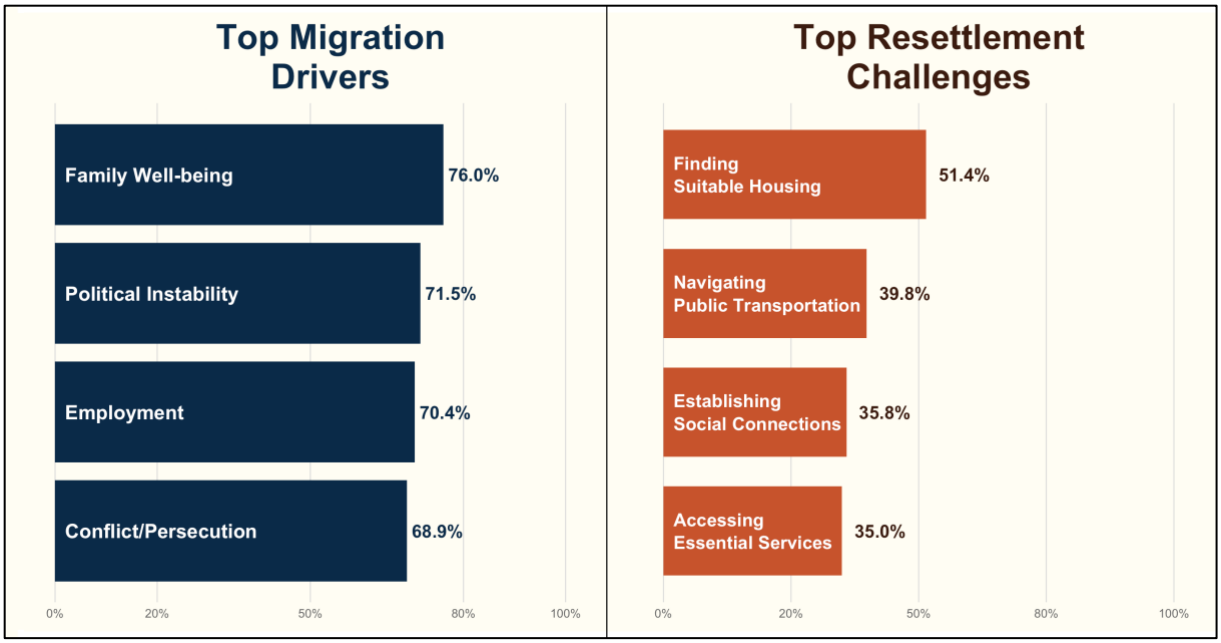
YOSHINARI KAJISHITA

Thousands of Afghan citizens have sought new beginnings abroad following Afghanistan's turbulent recent history. The fall of Kabul in August 2021 triggered one of the largest humanitarian evacuations in decades, as families fled war, political collapse, and uncertainty. For many, arriving in the United States represented more than safety—it marked a chance to rebuild their lives with dignity and hope. Yet the path to resettlement is rarely straightforward. Afghan newcomers must navigate complex systems of housing, healthcare, education, and employment, while carrying memories of trauma, separation, and loss.

This article draws entirely from *A Survey of Afghan Immigrants in the United States* (Kajishita et al., 2025a), a study jointly conducted by scholars from Hiroshima University and independent researchers from United States, bringing together research and field expertise from both countries. The survey was conducted between January and October 2024, and all findings reflect respondents' perceptions during that period. The report provides a comprehensive view of Afghan immigrants' lived experiences across the country, combining quantitative data and community-based perspectives. Both the full report (Kajishita et al., 2025a) and raw data (Kajishita et al. 2025b) are publicly accessible for transparency and further research.

> "We came here to be safe, but also to give back. This country gave us a chance—now we want to build a future here."

The findings reveal a portrait of resilience amid adversity, showing how Afghan immigrants are rebuilding their lives and contributing to the social fabric of American communities. The Afghan population in the United States is notably young and diverse. More than 70% of survey respondents were under the age of forty-five, reflecting a generation in its prime working and family-building years. Men accounted for 53.7% of respondents and women 25%, with the remainder choosing not to disclose their gender. Education levels also varied considerably: 31% held university degrees, 17.7% completed high school, 9.6% attended middle school, 7.7% completed only elementary school, and 7.1% reported no formal education. Afghan communities are concentrated primarily in Maryland, the District of Columbia, California, and Virginia, where cultural familiarity and community networks help ease the transition to American life.



Top Migration Drivers and Resettlement Challenges among Afghan Immigrants in the United States. Image created by author.

Survey results (illustrated in the figure above) indicate that migration decisions were primarily driven by safety, stability, and family well-being. The most influential factors included improving the family's quality of life, escaping political instability and conflict in Afghanistan, and seeking employment opportunities. Economic prospects and access to essential services also played a major role, with many respondents citing entrepreneurial opportunities, access to better healthcare, and the appeal of a diverse and inclusive environment as important motivations. In contrast, cultural and lifestyle considerations carried less weight. Some participants mentioned religious freedom, cultural exchange, and attraction to the American way of life, while others migrated to join family members already in the United States or to escape environmental challenges. Overall, the data suggest that migration decisions were shaped primarily by urgent needs for safety and livelihood, while cultural and lifestyle factors played a secondary role. As one participant explained, "In Afghanistan, there was no future for my children. We came here to find safety first and then to build a life."

The first months after arrival brought relief mixed with uncertainty. While many newcomers expressed gratitude and optimism, they also faced immediate challenges. Affordable housing proved difficult to find for many respondents, leading to overcrowded living situations in high-cost urban areas. More than half struggled to navigate unfamiliar systems for healthcare, transportation, and public benefits. Language barriers further compounded these issues, with many identifying English proficiency as a major obstacle to daily life. Despite these hurdles, Afghan immigrants emphasized their determination to adapt, learn, and give back to their new communities.

Community and nonprofit organizations have played a crucial role in supporting this transition. Healthcare programs were the most commonly used services, followed by educational support for children and English language classes. Job placement assistance reached many respondents, though some participants noted that these programs often failed to recognize their previous skills or professional experience. “The support was there,” one respondent said, “but it didn’t always match what we could do.” Still, structural barriers persist. Many Afghan immigrants remain uninsured, hindered by affordability issues and complicated paperwork. Housing insecurity continues to affect many families, particularly in states with high living costs. Employment remains one of the greatest challenges, as nearly half reported being unable to find jobs aligned with their qualifications. Limited English proficiency and lack of credential recognition create cycles of underemployment and economic vulnerability.

A family of Afghan evacuees leaving Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. (Photo: Sgt. Robert P Wormley III/U.S. Army)

Language and cultural adaptation are critical to breaking these cycles. Only a quarter of respondents described their English as advanced, while others were at intermediate or basic levels. Expanding flexible and community-based English courses, alongside cultural orientation programs, could help newcomers navigate systems more effectively. Afghan-led organizations are essential because they understand the linguistic, cultural, and emotional needs of the community.

Despite the challenges, Afghan immigrants remain hopeful about the future. Many aspire to advance their careers or start small businesses, pursue higher education or vocational training, and participate actively in community and civic life. At the same time, they maintain strong transnational connections—regularly communicating with relatives in Afghanistan and sending remittances to support family members. These ongoing ties illustrate how resettlement often involves balancing new beginnings in the United States with enduring responsibilities across borders.

The survey also revealed contrasting attitudes toward governance and institutions. Respondents expressed widespread dissatisfaction with government performance in Afghanistan, particularly regarding security, education, and healthcare. In contrast, they voiced strong trust in U.S. NGOs and

community-based organizations, emphasizing that local, practical initiatives are most effective in meeting their needs. The Afghan immigrant story is thus one of resilience, adaptation, and hope. As one participant put it, “We came here to be safe, but also to give back. This country gave us a chance—now we want to build a future here.” Listening to these voices and translating their experiences into inclusive policy can ensure that Afghan immigrants not only survive but thrive, enriching the diverse social fabric of the United States.

About the Author

Yoshinari Kajishita is a Next-Generation Fellow at the Graduate School of Innovation and Practice for Smart Society, Hiroshima University. His primary research focuses on agricultural and rural development in Central Asia, while his secondary interests include migration studies and community resilience. LinkedIn

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Peace without Progress

The Sustainability Dilemma in the Bangsamoro

Abstract

This article explores the paradox of "peace without progress" in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), where the signing of peace agreements and development assistance investments have yet to deliver equitable prosperity. While international donors and the Philippine government have implemented numerous development programs, the region continues to exhibit the highest poverty and stunting rates, the lowest literacy and functional rates, and the weakest economic growth in the country. This article argues that the sustainability of peace in the Bangsamoro hinges less on financial inputs than on addressing structural underdevelopment, weak governance, and entrenched political patronage. Sustaining peace in the Bangsamoro will happen if peace translates into tangible improvements in human security, inclusive growth, and institutional resilience.

Keywords: *Bangsamoro, development, official development assistance, sustainable peace*

RAIHAN A. YUSOPH

Walking past abandoned structures from earlier development programs, unused training centers, idle livelihood facilities, and half-finished infrastructure makes these failures unmistakable. Once presented as symbols of post-conflict reconstruction, they now reflect the struggles of development programs to take root. Fragmented planning, shifting political priorities, and limited local capacity meant that even well-funded projects were rarely sustained. These visible remnants of unrealized progress point back to the deeper historical conditions that shaped the Bangsamoro's long struggle for peace and development.

> "The Bangsamoro has succeeded in stopping the armed conflict, but it now must win a quieter, and arguably harder battle: the fight against systemic poverty and institutional fragility."

For generations, the Bangsamoro people have lived at the intersection of conflict and peace. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), long marked by armed resistance against the Philippine state, carries a legacy of marginalization and underdevelopment. Peace agreements promised transformation, and development assistance followed with the hope that peace would bring prosperity. While fighting between the liberation fronts and the state has ceased, progress in the Bangsamoro has lagged in terms of socioeconomic development compared to other regions in the country. This article argues that

peace in the Bangsamoro has yet to deliver the expected peace dividends. The persistence of poverty, weak institutions, and uneven access to services suggests that peace, while achieved politically, has yet to be realized in everyday life. In the Bangsamoro, these limitations created a vacuum where development programs became increasingly dependent on external actors. As the Philippine government and local institutions struggled to meet urgent reconstruction and livelihood demands, the responsibility of sustaining the peace process gradually extended beyond domestic boundaries. These conditions set the stage for deeper international engagement.

Driven by humanitarian considerations and the pursuit of global stability, international actors have long viewed peace agreements as gateways to development (Eide, 1996; Findley, 2018; Mross et al., 2022). The Bangsamoro peace process exemplifies this international commitment to resolve one of Southeast Asia's longest-running conflicts. From the 1976 Tripoli Agreement to the 1996 Final Peace Agreement (FPA) with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), and eventually to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), each agreement sought to transform armed struggle into political participation and prosperity (Akebo, 2021; Duque-Salazar et al., 2022). These milestones paved the way for the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2018, institutionalizing the BARMM government as a symbol of self-determination. Yet as peace became institutionalized through the BOL, expectations of socioeconomic transformation grew among Bangsamoro communities, local political leaders, and civil society organizations. The success of political settlements was now measured not by the absence of war, but by the presence of development.

Unused and non-functional infrastructure projects from the SZOPAD and ARMM Social Fund programs, photo taken by the author on April 24, 2025, in selected communities in Lanao del Sur, BARMM.

This transition mobilized vast development resources. International donors, including Japan, Australia, the United States, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other development agencies, joined the Philippine government in funding programs to reduce poverty, expand job opportunities, build infrastructure, and strengthen institutions (Aguja, 2000; Fernandez, 2014). Flagship efforts, such as the UN Multi-Donor Programme, the ARMM Social Fund, the ACT for Peace Programme, and the Mindanao Trust Fund-Reconstruction and Development Programme, signaled the world's commitment to a stable Bangsamoro.

Despite these extensive development interventions, the benefits remain elusive. Many communities perceive these interventions as externally driven, shaped more by donor agendas than by local priorities, which in turn undermines ownership and sustainability. Official data from the Department

of Economy, Planning, and Development (DEPDev) indicate that Bangsamoro received approximately USD 19.40 million in Official Development Assistance (ODA) project loans and USD 680.355 million in ODA grants from 2003 to 2024, amounts that reflect unprecedented external investment in the region's post-conflict transition.[1] Yet these figures raise an essential question: why has such substantial financial assistance not produced more sustainable improvements in people's everyday lives?

The persistence of weak development outcomes emphasizes this puzzle. Thirteen years after the 1996 FPA, poverty worsened to 61.8% in 2009 (PSA, 2015). In 2023, the Bangsamoro's poverty incidence stands at 23.5%, more than double the national rate of 10.9% (PSA, 2023). Today, despite receiving USD 7.38 billion in annual block grants (2019–2025), the Bangsamoro records the lowest Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) growth in the Philippines, at only 2.7%, compared to the national average of 5.7% (PSA, 2025). These figures emphasize that the Bangsamoro's economic development remains shallow, reflecting persistent gaps between state investment and local absorption capacity. Moreover, these numbers are not abstract; they reflect the lived struggles of families still waiting for jobs, children facing limited learning opportunities, and communities coping with inadequate public services. The disparity between development rhetoric and persistent grassroots hardship emphasizes a troubling contradiction: the promise of peace has not yet delivered broad-based prosperity.

Scholars have long debated whether development assistance can catalyze sustainable peace. Sachs (2006) and Dayanath and Ichihashi (2021) argue that development assistance can accelerate growth, reduce poverty, and strengthen institutions, particularly when focused on education, healthcare, and infrastructure. They suggest that development assistance can enhance resilience and prevent the recurrence of conflict by addressing structural inequality. But critical scholars warn that development assistance is not inherently transformative. Moyo (2009) and Chandler (2017) highlight that external assistance can create dependency, enable elite capture, and sidestep grassroot sectors when not grounded in local realities. These critiques resonate powerfully in the Bangsamoro context, where political clans, institutional fragility, and patronage systems can dilute the intended impact of development programs.

Thus, the challenge is neither the presence of conflict nor the absence of assistance, but whether assistance has genuinely confronted the structural drivers of underdevelopment. As Kabonga (2017) reminds us, the "primary goal of foreign aid is the global eradication of extreme poverty" (p.5). In the Bangsamoro, poverty remains deeply entrenched, and progress in human development continues to lag national levels. According to Chanda et al. (2023), 45% of children under five are affected by stunting, the highest prevalence of stunting in the country in 2023. Similarly, as reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in their 2024 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS), the Bangsamoro has the lowest basic and functional literacy rates in the Philippines. Its basic literacy rate is 81.0%, its illiteracy rate is 14.4%, and its functional literacy rate is 59.3% (PSA, 2025). Moreover, the region's human development index remains among the lowest in the Philippines, at about 0.629 (Maboloc, 2025). These data highlight a core disconnect: large-scale programs may exist, and funds may flow, yet the lived outcomes for ordinary people remain inadequate. This gap points to the broader sustainability challenge in post-conflict development. A recent assessment by Timberman and Moner (2025) of the six-year Bangsamoro Transition Authority highlights the persistence of entrenched clan politics, weak institutional capacity, and a shadow economy that undermines both legitimacy and state-sponsored development.

The sustainability of peace in the Bangsamoro ultimately rests on whether governance structures can deliver social services and economic inclusion. Unless assistance and autonomy are matched by transparency and accountability, development risks becoming another unfulfilled promise. To say that there is negative peace, or the absence of large-scale armed conflict between the state and the Moro revolutionary groups, is accurate. To say progress has arrived equitably is far less certain. The Bangsamoro has succeeded in stopping the armed conflict, but it now must win a quieter, and arguably harder battle: the fight against systemic poverty and institutional fragility. Peace without tangible

[1] Figures supplied by DEPDev.

improvement in daily life is fragile. Peace without justice and opportunity is incomplete. The Bangsamoro story shows that ending conflict is only the first chapter. The next requires addressing deep-rooted inequalities, investing in human capital, strengthening public institutions, and empowering communities, not just funding projects. For peace to truly be sustainable, development must be felt in households, classrooms, farms, and remote villages, and not only in budget books, donor reports, or political speeches. Peace in the Bangsamoro should not remain a political symbol but must become a lived social and economic reality. The challenge now is to transform peace agreements into dignity, block grants into inclusive growth, and assistance into lasting change. Only then can the Bangsamoro people truly say they are not merely living in peace, they are prospering because of it.

About the Author

Raihan A. Yusoph is a faculty member of the History Department at Mindanao State University–Marawi City and the former Peace Education Program Officer of the Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao (IPDM). He earned his BA and MA in History, specializing in Mindanao Studies, from MSU–Marawi and is currently pursuing his PhD under International Peace and Co-existence Program at Hiroshima University, Japan, as a MEXT Scholar. Google Scholar

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