Global Seed Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools

TOMODACHI SoftBank Group

A Decade + of Resilience:

Youth-Led Recovery and Innovation from Tohoku to Berkeley - and back

The TOMODACHI SoftBank Summer Leadership Program at UC Berkeley

2012 - 2024













Dedicated to the memory of Irene Hirano Inouye, a driving force behind the creation of the TOMODACHI Initiative and founding President of the U.S.-Japan Council





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Acknowledgments:

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We especially appreciate the insights of former U.S. Ambassador to Japan John V. Roos; Suzanne Basalla, former President of the USJC; Masato Ikeda, Accounting Unit Sustainability Department at SoftBank Group Corp; Tohoku Community Mentors: Taiki Goto, Representative Director of Asueno Kibou, Kenichi Bamba Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Bridge for Fukushima, and Yuta Kanno, Director of Katariba. Special recognition to Mayo Hotta, SoftBank's first program lead, for her alumni outreach, and to past program staff Shirl Buss, Mutsumi Ogaki and Mai Ryuno for their thoughtful feedback. Finally, we honor the many teachers, mentors, resident advisors, program coordinators, host families and community members who supported the program.

Tohoku is stronger and more resilient because of these exceptional individuals and all who contributed to this transformative program.

TOMODACHI = SoftBank Group

Executive Summary:

The TOMODACHI SoftBank Summer Leadership Program (2012-2024) at the University of California, Berkeley emerged from the devastation of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake to empower over 1,000 youth from Japan's Tohoku region as leaders in community recovery and resilience. Developed through a partnership led by the U.S.-Japan Council (USJC), funded and guided by SoftBank, and co-designed and implemented with UC Berkeley and Global Seed, the Program combined cultural exchange with the Y-PLAN (Youth-Plan, Learn, Act, Now) methodology to foster youth-driven social impact and resilience.

U.S. Ambassador to Japan at the time, John V. Roos, was the original visionary behind the Program and believed that **"Investing in youth—rather than just rebuilding infrastructure—was essential for Tohoku's long-term recovery."** His vision guided the initiative to focus not only on immediate disaster relief but on nurturing a generation of leaders who could shape a resilient future.

Through immersive experiences at UC Berkeley and collaborative work with local community leaders in Tohoku, TOMODACHI participants engaged in community development projects that bridged American and Japanese communities. Students tackled economic revitalization, disaster preparedness, and social inclusion through initiatives such as:

- Tomotra: Revitalizing tourism in Iwaki City
- Memory Lantern Project: Offering creative avenues for healing
- Agricultural initiatives: Promoting economic recovery in Fukushima

Outcomes for students included:

- Evolving into local civic leaders, educators, and community builders
- Gaining practical experience in project implementation and leadership
- Career trajectories connected to the TOMODACHI experience

These projects and participants' leadership paths demonstrated how youth-led action drives tangible change, influencing not only local policies but also inspiring broader movements for youth engagement and leadership.

This culminating Program Brief provides an in-depth look at the Program's design, achievements, and lasting impact, offering insights and inspiration for future youth-led global initiatives in resilience and community development.

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1) Introduction

In the wake of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, which claimed nearly 20,000 lives and displaced half a million people, a bold vision emerged: empowering youth as leaders in recovery, resilience, and renewal.

The TOMODACHI Initiative, a public-private partnership between the U.S.-Japan Council and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, was founded to support Japan's recovery by investing in the next generation of Japanese and American leaders through educational, cultural, and leadership programs.

One of its first and most expansive efforts was the TOMODACHI SoftBank Summer Leadership Program (the Program), which brought over 1,000 high school students from Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima (Tohoku Prefectures) to UC Berkeley for a transformative experience. Over the past decade, these young leaders have turned personal loss into actionable change, addressing economic, environmental, and social challenges in their communities.

At the core of the TOMODACHI program at Berkeley was a belief in youth-driven change. Ambassador Roos saw that investing in young people—not just rebuilding infrastructure—was key to Tohoku's long-term recovery.

With this vision, he helped lay the foundation for TOMODACHI (friendship in Japanese) in partnership with the USJC. When SoftBank, under Masayoshi Son, joined as lead sponsor, the vision became a reality—ensuring not just financial backing, but a lasting commitment to youth leadership and empowerment.



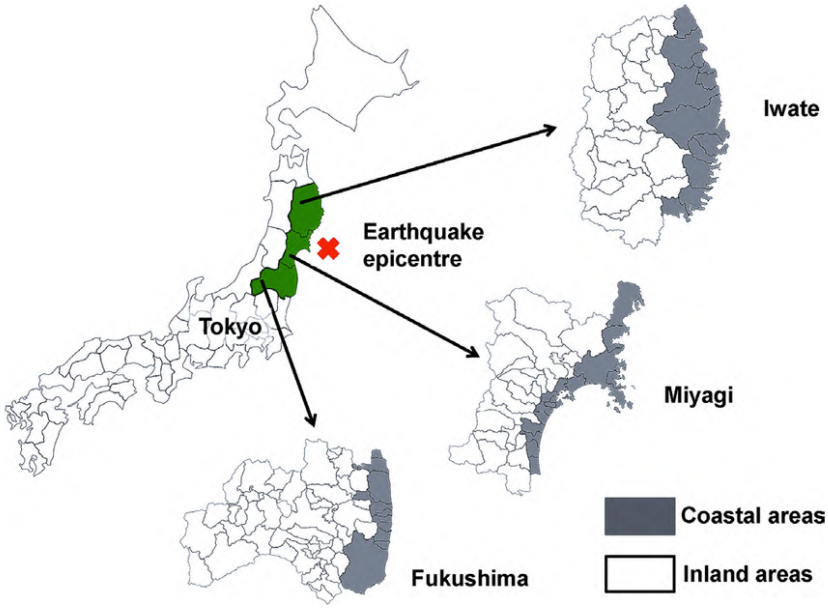
"This program took a whole generation of young people and gave them hope. It spread the message that there is a brighter future."

— Ambassador **John V. Roos**



In addition to leadership development, the Program became a movement. Integrating cultural exchange with Y-PLAN, it provided students with real-world problem-solving tools to drive community transformation. Through this immersive experience, participants developed the confidence, networks, and strategies to become changemakers—both in Japan and beyond.

This brief explores the impact, outcomes, and enduring legacy of the Program at UC Berkeley, delving into the remarkable journey of these youth leaders. How, since 2012, their time at Berkeley shaped their vision, how they returned home to rebuild Tohoku, and how their stories continue to inspire a global movement for youth-led resilience.







The Origin Story

A Vision Sparked by Youth Potential

The TOMODACHI Initiative was born from an urgent question: How could Japan's recovery extend beyond rebuilding to create lasting change for future generations?

> *"Ambassador Roos had the idea for what became TOMODACHI,"*
>
> recalled Suzanne Basalla, former Chief of Staff to Ambassador Roos and later President & CEO of the USJC.
>
> *"Roos came up with the spark of the idea, and USJC became the engine that made it happen."*

Recognizing the need for sustained investment in youth leadership, Roos and USJC partnered with SoftBank, a leading Japanese telecommunications company.

SoftBank Group

TOMODACHI

SoftBank's Commitment: A Decade of Investment in Leadership

For **Masayoshi Son**, SoftBank's **Chairman and CEO**, the TOMODACHI SoftBank Summer Leadership Program was personal. Having studied in the U.S. as a teenager and later as a UC Berkeley undergraduate, he understood firsthand the life-changing impact of global education.
In his welcoming remarks, he stated:



> *"You have come to Berkeley as I did many years ago. You will meet many people, learn many different things and ways of thinking, and return ready to act for your communities in Tohoku."*
> (see 2012 Video)



SoftBank's involvement extended beyond funding—it was a **hands-on partnership**. **Masato Ikeda**, Accounting Unit, Sustainability Department at SoftBank, played a direct role in shaping the Program, serving as **an inspiring guest lecturer** each year.

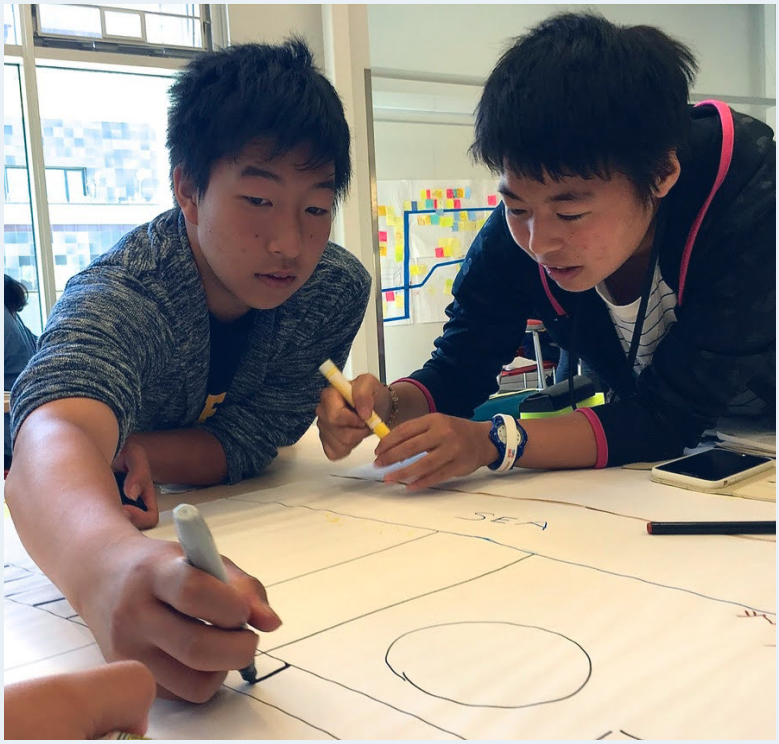
> *"TOMODACHI was not just about providing aid—it was about giving young people the vision and skills to rebuild and lead their communities into the future,"*
>
> —Masato Ikeda





At Berkeley, the Program was strengthened by dedicated team members from USJC and SoftBank's first program lead, Mayo Hotta. She worked closely with David Beiser of Global Seed to design TOMODACHI's early structure, ensuring students received leadership training and mentorship. Later, SoftBank's Rino Sasaki deepened the connection between Tohoku and Berkeley, sustaining the Program's impact across generations of students.







UC Berkeley Framework



2) Berkeley Framework

Bridging Cultural Exchange and Leadership Development

The TOMODACHI SoftBank Summer Leadership Program was a transformative experience, blending cultural exchange and mentorship with leadership training in resilience and community development. The Berkeley framework had two components:

Part 1:
Cultural Exchange and Holistic Support

The Program's first pillar provided students with the emotional and social support needed to heal, grow, and thrive in a new environment.

College Ambassadors & Peer Mentors:
UC Berkeley Resident Advisors and 500+ peer mentors supported students in adjusting, navigating cultural differences, and maximizing their experience.

Homestays with Bay Area Families:
Early cohorts of students lived with local families, gaining first-hand insight into American daily life and deepening cross-cultural connections.

Cultural Excursions:
Students explored Northern California, visiting historic sites, engaging with local communities, and connecting with local leaders and policymakers.

Unique to the Program at Berkeley, these experiences provided valuable insights into community resilience and disaster recovery—focusing on both California and Tohoku.

Experiencing College Life:
Living in Berkeley dorms, attending workshops, and interacting with faculty and civic leaders broadened participants' perspectives on higher education and leadership opportunities.

> *"The friendships and mentorship we built at Berkeley gave us strength—knowing we weren't alone in this journey."*
>
> Sakura, participant, 2015

This cultural and social support laid the foundation for the second pillar: developing leadership skills through Y-PLAN.





Part 2: Learning to Lead—The Y-PLAN Blueprint for Resilience and Social Change

At the heart of the program's leadership training was Y-PLAN (Youth - Plan, Learn, Act, Now), an award-winning civic action methodology developed by UC Berkeley's Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S). Y-PLAN empowers students to tackle real-world challenges, collaborate with local leaders, and apply their personal experiences to global community resilience efforts.

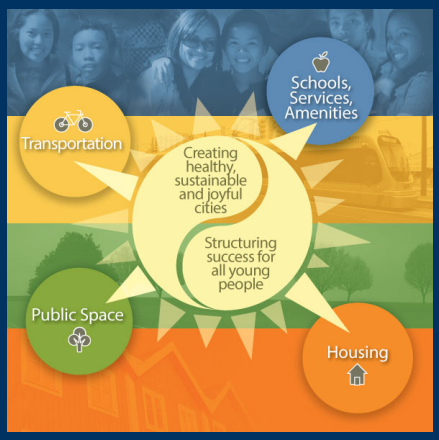
Project-Based Learning:
Students worked as social action consultants, developing strategies for community resilience, disaster preparedness, and community revitalization.

Stakeholder Engagement:
Teams partnered with city planners, community leaders, and government officials to analyze and propose solutions for San Francisco Bay Area communities in Richmond, Oakland, and Berkeley. Together adults and youth formed a powerful, intergenerational community of practice.

Presentation & Action Planning:
Each cohort developed proposals and presented their ideas to faculty, community leaders, city officials, and SoftBank executives, ensuring their work had a tangible impact both locally and back home in Tohoku.

"Before the TOMODACHI program at Berkeley, I never thought about youth participation. I believed it was normal for young people to follow adults. Y-PLAN taught me that when youth and adults work together, communities become stronger."
— Chikara Ushiki, Instructor and Program Coordinator







Real-World Impact: Local Solutions, Global Lessons

A core strength of Y-PLAN is its emphasis on action over theory, empowering students to engage directly in social change. Before developing their action plans for Tohoku, participants took part in a "Mini Y-PLAN" experience, working alongside local leaders in Oakland, Richmond, and across the San Francisco Bay Area to address pressing community challenges. Among the many impactful projects, two examples illustrate the power of global exchange in fostering local leadership, deepening compassion, and driving meaningful social action.





2016 Y-PLAN Mini Project: Building Resilience and Emergency Readiness for Oakland

In 2016, students collaborated with Oakland's Chief Resilience Officer, who served as their Y-PLAN "Client," asking:

"How can Oakland build a more resilient community, particularly in preparation for earthquakes?"

Eager teams of youth leaders from Tohoku explored Oakland's vulnerabilities, examining sea level rise, urban decay, and disaster recovery strategies—drawing insightful parallels to their own region's rebuilding efforts. Their final recommendation? Strengthening social connections to ensure that in times of crisis, residents know whom to rely on and how to support one another effectively.

"Community connection is everything...

That was the most important part of our recovery"

— Hiroto, 2016 participant



2024 Y-PLAN Mini Project: Addressing Issues of Aging and Population Loss in North Richmond, CA

In 2024, students worked in North Richmond, where community leaders welcomed their insights on revitalization, population loss, and an aging population—challenges strikingly similar to those in Tohoku. This reinforced a powerful realization: rebuilding communities—whether in Japan or California—requires resilience, connection, and youth leadership.







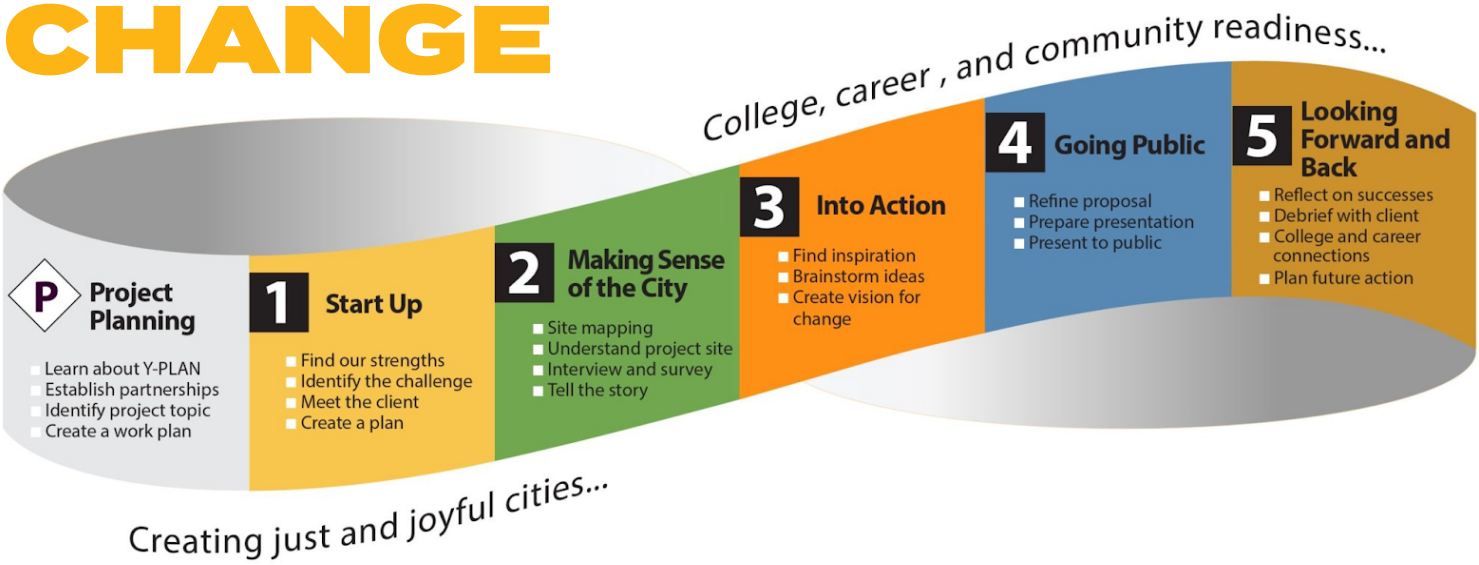




Taiki Goto, Lead Community Mentor in 2024, shared:

> *"Working with North Richmond accelerated our ability to take action back home. During a three-day Y-PLAN project with the North Richmond Community Development Center, students learned about local issues and engaged in hands-on activities with community members of all ages. This experience gave them a clearer image of taking action more quickly, allowing them to move forward without overthinking."*

Y-PLAN ROADMAP TO CHANGE



Step 1: Start Up

Getting to know each other's strengths



Step 2: Making Sense of the Community

Collecting data & visiting local organizations

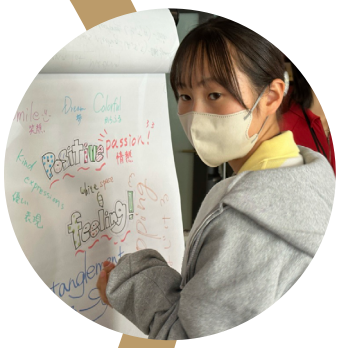




"Students learned the power of data collection and using evidence to support their ideas"
— Kenichi Bamba, Fukushima community partner

Step 3:
Into Action

Brainstorming ideas to build resilient communities









"Prior to coming to UC Berkeley, I never believed my ideas really mattered, let alone could change my community"
— Yui, 2019 participant







Step 4:
Going Public

Presenting visions for change to leaders

Step 5: Looking Forward and Back

Taking It Home: Planning for Change in Tohoku

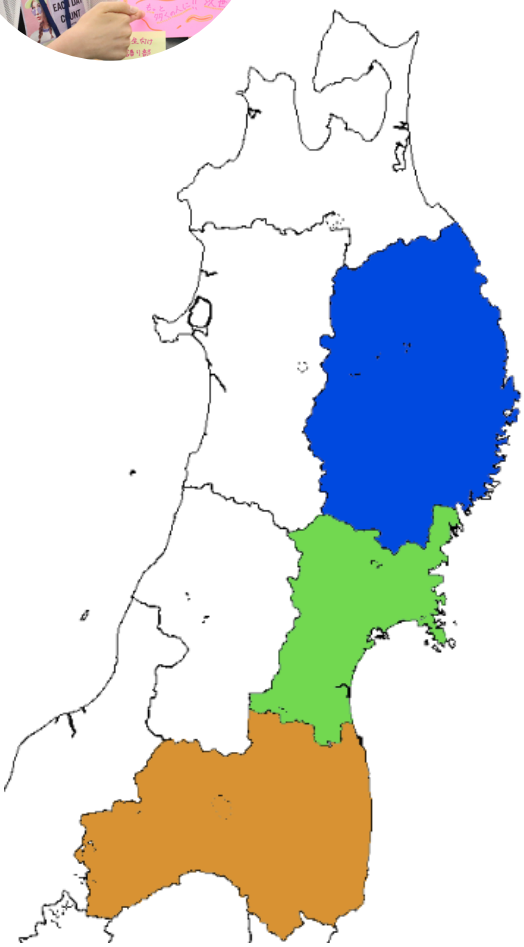
In the final week, students applied everything they had learned—from community development and resilience to leadership—to shape action plans for Tohoku using the Y-PLAN methodology and framework. **To support this transition, three to five community leaders from Tohoku joined each year, offering guidance, local context, and mentorship.** These leaders helped students refine their strategies and prepare for real-world impact, ensuring their insights from Berkeley translated into meaningful change back home.

Through this process, TOMODACHI students left Berkeley not just inspired but equipped—ready to bring their knowledge, strategies, and networks to lead change in Tohoku.









As Toshi Ohashi reflected:

"Y-PLAN was transformative—it challenged participants to confront critical issues impacting Tohoku communities, such as aging cities and population loss. By identifying these challenges and taking bold, community-driven actions, the program empowered participants to envision and create a lasting positive impact."

3) A Decade of Impact

Measuring Change Through Youth Leadership, Agency, and Action

This section highlights the TOMODACHI SoftBank Summer Leadership Program's lasting impact, from individual leadership journeys to transformative community projects, demonstrating how youth leadership can shape entire regions.

"One of the most powerful lessons was how communities in California and Tohoku could learn from each other's strengths."

— Nami, a 2018 participant

"TOMODACHI wasn't just about leadership in theory—it gave students concrete experiences in civic engagement, helping them understand how policy, business, and social impact intersect. And, most importantly, the ability to act!"

— Suzanne Basalla





As Tohoku's recovery evolved, so did the needs and challenges of its communities. Over a decade, even through the COVID-19 pandemic, the Program equipped young leaders with the tools and networks to drive meaningful change, fostering intergenerational collaboration, local innovation, and systemic transformation.



IMPACT

"The Berkeley program was not just about providing aid—it was about giving young people the vision and skills to rebuild their communities... This program didn't just give students experiences abroad—it equipped them with the mindset and tools to take action back home."

— Masato Ikeda





"The program started my life and pushed me in the direction to achieve my dream... I learned nothing is impossible. You grab the chance and run with it, you are the driver of your path."

— Haruka Sato



"TOMODACHI alumni are now in their mid-twenties, becoming social leaders and entrepreneurs in their hometowns. The networks, project planning methods, and leadership skills they gained from Y-PLAN continue to support their work and strengthen their communities."

— Kenichi Bamba





"What I saw in Tohoku was a community destroyed—not just physically, but socially. When we went to Berkeley, we saw solutions—graffiti art, homeless shelters, and local responses to crises. That learning stayed with us."

— Mayo Hotta



"TOMODACHI changed how adults viewed young people. Seeing high school students take action pushed city officials to rethink how they included youth in local decision-making."

— Yuta Kanno





"This program wasn't just about students going abroad—it was about ensuring they returned with the skills and confidence to drive change at home."

— Suzanne Basalla

Transforming Communities

TOMODACHI's Student-Led Project Highlights

Y-PLAN has empowered participants to lead impactful initiatives in economic development, disaster recovery, cultural preservation, and education. **TOMODACHI alumni projects have revitalized local businesses, strengthened community resilience, and influenced policies, creating lasting change across Japan.** From youth led city planning and tourism initiatives to arts based healing and disaster prevention education, these efforts continue to inspire new generations.

This section highlights:
a) key projects, categorized by type, implemented by TOMODACHI participants and b) 10 alumni whose leadership is shaping the future of their communities.



Economic Development and Local Business Revitalization:

TOMOTRA
(Student-led Cultural Tourism Initiative):
Guided over 300 new tourists through Iwaki City, promoting sustainable tourism in partnership with H.I.S. Travel Agency. Learn more here.

FM Futaba Project
(Farmers Market Revitalization):
Established a thriving market in the Fukushima Daiichi evacuation area, boosting local agriculture and driving economic recovery.

Ichino Soba Revitalization
(Cultural Food Preservation Initiative):
Revived the Ichino Soba tradition with community events, supporting small businesses, and strengthening local identity.

Harvesting Trust: TOMODACHI Farm
(Agricultural Tourism Project):
Restored communities' agricultural reputation through hands-on farm tours, engaging 150 participants in tasting safe, fresh produce.

Somauma Teikibin
(Connecting Communities Through Local Produce):
An innovative online shopping service promoting Fukushima's recovery by delivering curated seasonal products, regional stories, and heartfelt student messages, building lasting connections with communities nationwide.



Disaster Recovery and Community Resilience

Kamaishi Magnet Art Project
(Turning Temporary Housing into Homes):
Transformed cold, metal temporary housing into vibrant, welcoming spaces by decorating with over 6,000 custom magnets. This creative initiative spread nationwide, bringing color, comfort, and a sense of belonging to disaster-affected communities.



Storytelling for Change
(Documentary for Disaster Recovery Awareness):
Captured powerful community voices, strengthening advocacy and highlighting ongoing recovery needs.



Disaster Prevention Education
(Educational Materials for Young Children):
Integrated disaster preparedness lessons into Sompo Japan's national programs, building resilience from an early age.

Otsuchi Elderly Outreach Project
(Supporting Vulnerable Residents):
Provided shopping assistance and social visits to reduce isolation and improve mobility for elderly residents.



Cultural Preservation and Regional Identity

Sendai GoTo Sightseeing App
(Youth-Developed Tourism Technology):
Created by high school students, featuring mascots for Miyagi's 35 municipalities to enhance tourism and regional pride.

Ishinomaki Yumemiru Closet
(Community Fashion Initiative):
Engaged students and designers to create fashion inspired by Ishinomaki's history, blending art with community identity.



Cherry Blossom Connections
(Tie-Dye Art Celebrating Resilience):
Promoted cultural appreciation and environmental sustainability through art inspired by resilient cherry blossoms.



Art for Inclusive Community Building
(Accessibility Awareness Project):
Raised public dialogue on urban inclusivity with art installations on tactile pavements for the visually impaired.



Education, Leadership, and Youth Engagement

Y-PLAN Otsuchi
(Youth Engagement in Education Policy):
Inspired the town of Otsuchi to adopt Y-PLAN's model, leading to youth-led civic and disaster recovery initiatives across Tohoku.



Young People's Association for Passion
(Intergenerational Mentorship Program):
Engaged students and designers to create fashion inspired by Ishinomaki's history, blending art with community identity.

The TOMOrrow Project
(Youth Collaboration in Iwate Prefecture):
United high school students from inland and coastal regions, promoting unity and awareness post-disaster.



Public Space & Civic Engagement
(T4M Urban Development Initiative in Miyagi Prefecture):
Engaged youth in community planning and development, inspiring career paths in education and technology while strengthening local resilience.

Alumni Spotlights:

From TOMODACHI to Community Leadership

This section provides a **brief snapshot** of participant's growth over a decade, detailing their **program experience**, **projects**, and **career paths**.



Makoto Sasaki *(Iwate):*

Created disaster prevention educational materials for preschoolers, partnering with organizations and integrating them into Sompo Japan's resources. At just 25, Makoto became Iwate Prefecture's youngest city council member, championing community resilience.

Haruka Shiraiwa *(Fukushima):*

Founded TOMOTRA tourism, guiding over 300 participants and empowering high school students to lead local tourism initiatives. Haruka's leadership directly led to a dynamic career in human resources consulting.



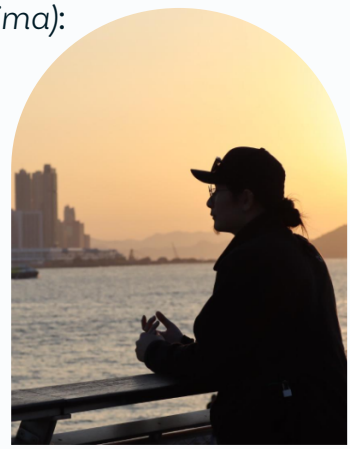


Asuka Ito *(Miyagi)*:

Established the Young People's Association for Passion, bridging generations through volunteer work and dialogues on grief and resilience. Her impactful work gained national media attention, and she continues to mentor Program participants.

Takumi Nemoto *(Fukushima)*:

Presented on the earthquake at cultural festivals in Okinawa, later majoring in tourism to amplify the stories of the disaster's impact. Takumi turned personal experience into a powerful cultural mission.





Haruka Yashiro *(Fukushima)*:

While volunteering in Fukushima, she discovered her passion for supporting the region's reconstruction. Today, Haruka is a professional with TEPCO, working on the decommissioning of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.

Mana Sasaki *(Miyagi)*:

Directed a fashion show in Ishinomaki using Lolita fashion to express the theme of 'living life as you are.' Mana's event encouraged self-expression and continues to strengthen intergenerational community ties.





Ami Miura *(Miyagi)*:
Launched a high school group focused on town redevelopment, applying TOMODACHI insights into local initiatives. Her exposure to entrepreneurship sparked newfound confidence to address community challenges head-on.

Maasa Mishina *(Miyagi)*:
Produced a compelling video showcasing the voices of disaster-affected communities. Now a video director in Tokyo, Maasa continues to highlight Tohoku's stories through film and theater.





Miho Onotora *(Miyagi)*:
Led revitalization projects in Kesennuma City, building strong communication and leadership skills. Now a nurse, Miho is committed to supporting local healthcare in a community facing medical staff shortages.

Tsubasa Sasaki *(Miyagi)*:
Drove sustainable community development through the T4M initiative. After 10 years in Tokyo's IT sector, Tsubasa now teaches Y-PLAN based learning empowering high school students and training future leaders in Miyagi.



Adults' lives transformed as well!



Toshinori Ohashi:
Inspired by Y-PLAN, Toshi (2016 mentor from Waseda University), launched the T2 Project in Tamura City, empowering junior high students to reimagine their community's future.
Learn more here.

Mayo Hotta:
SoftBank's first program lead was so inspired by TOMODACHI and Y-PLAN that after moving to Israel, she launched the Eshkol in Japan 2024: Change Maker Program, promoting cross-cultural exchange and youth leadership.
Learn more here.



A Ripple Effect:

From Individual Projects to Systemic Change

While TOMODACHI transformed students, its impact extended far beyond them.

Building a Network of Change:

- Tohoku leaders brought Y-PLAN to Japan, embedding youth civic engagement in recovery efforts.
- Mentors and local leaders supported student-led initiatives, strengthening civic participation.
- Businesses and nonprofits embraced TOMODACHI alumni, integrating their leadership and vision into social impact work.

TOMODACHI's influence didn't stop with students—it fostered a movement, creating a network of intergenerational leadership where youth and adults collaborated to drive meaningful change.

> ***"We talk about the students that participated, over 1,000, but the impact goes even further—reaching over 1,000 adults, including host families, mentors, local leaders, and facilitators"***
>
> *— David Beiser*



> ***"One of the most rewarding parts of TOMODACHI was seeing students return to Japan and take on leadership roles, from launching nonprofits, to working in government, to advocating for community change."***
>
> *— Suzanne Basalla*

SoftBank's Own Transformation:
A Corporate Shift in Mindset

SoftBank Group

"Before the earthquake and this program, I saw high school students as just children without much to share. But I learned their ideas—filled with dreams, hope, and energy—are valuable.

This realization changed how I view young people—not just as an age group, but as a source of inspiration."

— Masato Ikeda







4) A Lasting Legacy

From TOMODACHI to Y-PLAN Global

As the TOMODACHI Soft-Bank Summer Leadership Program concludes, its impact continues—not just in Tohoku, but in the global movement it helped spark. From local education policies integrating youth-driven civic engagement to community leaders rethinking disaster recovery and resilience, this work has transformed cities, schools, and entire regions.

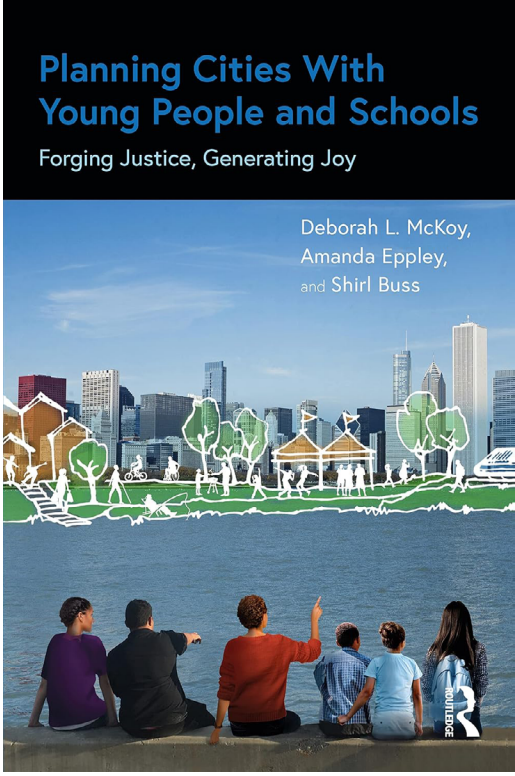
But this is just the beginning.

A New Chapter: The Launch of Y-PLAN Global

Building on this legacy, Global Seed and the UC Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools (CC+S) have combined their expertise to launch Y-PLAN Global —an initiative designed to take youth leadership in civic action and social change to the next level. Y-PLAN Global will be the engine driving the next decade of youth-led transformation, ensuring young leaders continue to be at the forefront of resilience, community development, and climate justice.

Call to Action: Shaping the Next Decade of Youth Leadership

As we look ahead, the challenge is not just sustaining this work—but expanding it, amplifying its impact, and ensuring that young people have the tools, platforms, and networks to lead change.

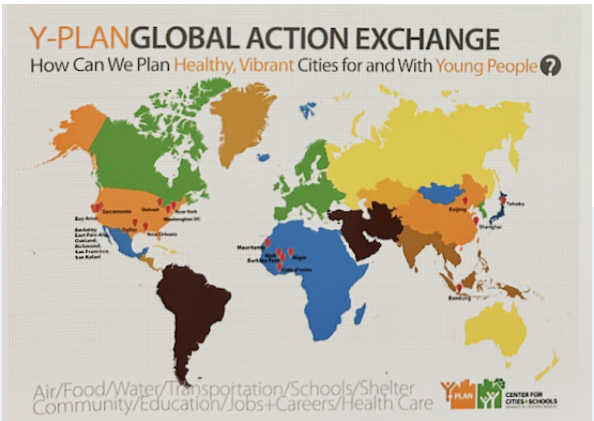


- ☑ Empowering displaced and vulnerable youth to shape the future of their communities
- ☑ Strengthening public-private partnerships to sustain youth-led solutions
- ☑ Leveraging emerging technologies, such as AI, to build more inclusive, adaptive, and future-ready communities.

The TOMODACHI program ignited a movement—but the work of youth-driven civic action is far from over. With proposed projects from Ethiopia to the US Territories in the Pacific, Y-PLAN Global envisions the next decade where young people take on an even more significant role in shaping more resilient, just, and joyful societies.

Berkeley Center for Cities + Schools

Y-PLAN GLOBAL
Youth Engagement Across the Globe



https://y-plan.global



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