

sustainable japan

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Vamos Together works and plays to bring people of all kinds together Baseball star Alex Ramirez's NPO helps special kids

Name: Alex "Rami-chan" Ramirez

Title: Founder, Vamos Together
URL: <https://vamos-together.org/>
Hometown: Pinango, Venezuela
Years in Japan: 23

Leaders & Readers

LOUISE GEORGE KITTAKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Alex Ramirez is probably best known for his long and successful career as a top baseball player in Japan, which earned him the affectionate nickname "Rami-chan" from delighted fans. These days, his focus is firmly on his family — his Japanese wife, Miho, and their four young children, including a son who has Down syndrome. Ramirez is also devoting his energies to Vamos Together, the nonprofit organization he co-founded with Miho in order to support people with special needs and their families.

The birth of his oldest child, Kenji, in 2015 was a turning point for Ramirez. He had just started his job as a team manager at the time,



When asked about his life motto, he simply replied, "Family is forever." HARUO MOTOHASHI

and recalls his first media interview in the new role.

"I was happy to tell them about my son having Down syndrome, but afterwards I was pulled aside by one of the high-ranking bosses and told that I shouldn't have talked about that," said Ramirez. "My reaction was: 'Baseball is something that comes and goes, my son is for life. There will never be a time when I stop talking about Kenji-kun.'"

Ramirez and Miho subsequently welcomed two more sons and a daughter to their family.

After participating in several events aimed specifically at children with special needs, the couple were troubled by the lack of integration and inclusion. They thought this could be problematic for families like their own, separating rather than uniting them. "We started talking about having something in which everyone could participate. I said, 'Vamos! Let's go!' — and that became the inspiration for the name of our NPO," Ramirez explained.

Vamos Together was launched in 2020 and encourages people of all ages and abilities to join its activities. "We believe that differences are a good thing, and we shouldn't separate people; we should be able to unite people and help them understand these differences and each other. Vamos' slogan is 'Everyone is different! Everyone is good!'," he said.

Connecting through sports

One of Vamos Together's main activities is an annual sports day, held in a friendly, noncompetitive spirit. Last year's event took place on a ship in collaboration with MSC Cruises, and participants enjoyed explor-

ing the onboard facilities. Other initiatives include a cheerleading team, Vamos Cheer, and weekly training lessons at CrossFit Motomachi Bay, a gym in Yokohama owned by Miho. While children with special needs make up the majority of participants in the cheerleading and training lessons, siblings are encouraged to help out and join in if they so wish.

Drawing on Ramirez's background in baseball and his interest in encouraging young players, Vamos Together also sponsors the Rami-chan Baseball Cup for teams of children from ages 8 to 10. The competition runs from September to November, with 32 teams and over 550 youngsters taking part last year. The highlight is an end-of-season stadium day, which includes a performance by Vamos' cheer team, with players and their families coming together to celebrate the children's efforts.

"Kenji designs the shirts for the All-Star Team, which we put together with one player from each team in the Rami-chan Cup. We also encourage any special needs siblings of the players to join in," said Ramirez, noting how this can contribute to mutual acceptance and understanding among the children.

Helping to change perceptions

While people in Japan can be kind to those with special needs, Ramirez feels that society is not yet ready to fully embrace the potential and abilities of people like his son. "They mean well here, but there is still a lack of understanding," he said. He pointed out that when many Japanese people meet a child with Down syndrome, their first thought is "kawaiisô" ("poor thing!"). People from other



HARUO MOTOHASHI

countries, on the other hand, are more likely to offer the child a cheerful greeting and a high five.

A key part of parenting for Ramirez is encouraging Kenji to try a wide variety of things for himself — something that often surprises the parents of other special needs children. "After Kenji was born, the doctor told us not to let him do anything strenuous, as his muscles were not that well-developed and he was delicate," he recalls. "At that point, I could have been overprotective of my son, as many parents tend to be. But I believe that you have to let them grow and

be themselves."

Ramirez is also keenly aware that making a special needs child the focus of parental attention may lead to feelings of resentment among sisters and brothers. He and his wife are proactively involving the siblings in day-to-day support for Kenji, and everyone works as a team. "The parents are the ones with the power to say, 'Hey, we are all in this together, let's help each other! It's about communication,'" he said. He is pleased to see that this approach has naturally led to his children showing concern for the needs of people outside the family, too.

Ballplayer, coach, businessman, dad

Born and raised in Venezuela, Alex Ramirez made his Major League Baseball debut in the United States in 1998. He came to Japan in 2001, playing for the Yakult Swallows and Yomiuri Giants, and then was manager for the Yokohama DeNa BayStars. In 2013 he became the first foreign-born player in Japanese professional baseball to reach 2,000 home runs, leading to his induction into the prestigious Meikyukai (Golden Players Club). His contributions to the league also earned him a place in the Japanese Baseball Hall of Fame in 2023, making him the first Latin American player to receive such an honor.

Along with his current activities with Vamos Together, Ramirez imports specialty coffee, cacao and rum from Venezuela with his company, Chuo Trading Japan, and he is also co-owner of Havana 1950, a Cuban restaurant in Tokyo. He shares three sons and a daughter with his wife, Miho.

Stronger together

Vamos Together formed an official partnership with Yokohama in 2023, creating a chance to help plan and implement events where it can make a difference. Ramirez is also open to collaboration with other organizations. "Everything is a learning experience, and by interacting with others and sharing resources, we may be able to learn something that can make us become better."

Eventually he hopes to create a physical space around Vamos Together, in the form of a center where parents of special needs children can exchange information and get support. Another goal is having after-school classes for young people, and helping them move forward with training and jobs down the line. "I would love to start something here in Yokohama first, and then maybe expand to other places," Ramirez said with a smile in closing.



OAT Agrio grows better farms with green tech, agrochemicals

ESG/SDGs

MAIKO MURAOKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

OAT Agrio Co. Ltd. produces environmentally friendly fertilizers and other agricultural chemicals for the sake of both better food security and nature. In a recent interview with The Japan Times, the company's president, Hisashi Oka, talked about its hands-on efforts to learn more and continue improving its products and services.

The company signed a partnership agreement with the town of Shintomi in Miyazaki Prefecture to promote and develop local agriculture in 2022, and started operations at an experimental farm in 2023.

One of the projects grows strawberries using Agrio Ichigo Master, a comprehensive service that includes cultivation technology and essential materials such as fertilizers and agrochemicals. "Strawberries are prone to diseases and pests, which generally results in increased use of agrochemicals," Oka pointed out. OAT Agrio's solution not only reduces agrochemicals and replaces them with safer or more natural ones, but also supports new farmers through harnessing artificial intelligence to evaluate plants' conditions.

Another project focuses on demonstrating "probioponics," which uses microorganism-based organic fertilizers in a hydroponic cultivation system. Fertilizers are supplied in precise amounts through drip tubes only when needed. "This has led to 20% to 30% less use of fertilizers," Oka said. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

launched its Strategy Midori for a sustainable food system in 2021, aiming to reduce chemical fertilizers by 30% and increase the proportion of organic farming to 25%.

While no one doubts the need for promoting sustainable agriculture, food security is also becoming a pressing issue in the international community. OAT Agrio is committed to developing technologies that address both issues at the same time.

Oka explained that the challenge of organic fertilizers lies in controlling their ingredients, unlike chemical fertilizers whose ingredients are homogenized and guaranteed. "On the other hand, more than 90% of ingredients for chemical fertilizers are imported," he said, meaning that shortages due to unexpected events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine can occur at any time.

OAT Agrio continues to particularly direct its research and development capabilities toward pest control using environmentally and human-friendly materials derived from natural substances. For example, Suffoil, which controls mites and is widely used for mandarin orange and tomato production, is made mainly of safflower oil. The fungicide Kaligreen is certified as organic under the Japanese Agricultural Standards (JAS). "It is used quite extensively in North and South American countries to control mildew on wheat and vegetables," Oka said.

Another product category that the company is strong in is biostimulants, which help reduce stresses on crops from environmental changes and herbicides and accelerate growth. "The damage crops suffer from extreme weather and climate change is immense. How to mitigate this is a significant challenge in achieving sustainable food production," Oka said. The company presented its research findings about auxins, a type of hormone in plants, at the Biostimulants World Congress in Florida in 2021. "The research showed that when a specific gene in a crop is stimulated, the hormone is activated, facilitating faster and stronger growth," Oka said. One of the company's products that uses this effect, Atonik, has already been



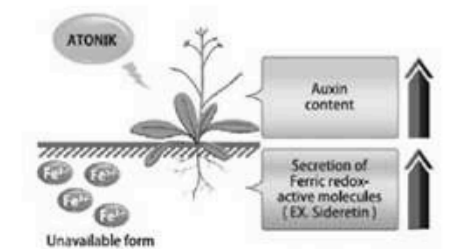
Hisashi Oka, president and CEO OAT AGRIO

registered and is being sold in 55 countries.

Many of OAT Agrio's products are widely used around the world. The company and its 20-plus affiliates worldwide sold its products in 94 countries in 2022. "About 70% of the total sales come from overseas, and more than 65% of our employees are foreigners," Oka said. He believes that a respect for the uniqueness of each affiliated company is necessary because each region has a different environment, requiring different agricultural techniques. OAT Agrio encourages collaboration between companies to share know-how and grow together.

OAT Agrio has also been building relationships with individual consumers by sharing its abundant knowledge of farming and horticulture as well as developing and selling retail products. On Instagram, it shares tips for growing plants and answers questions from consumers, and has gained about 50,000 followers. Oka believes it is the company's mission to encourage consumers to experience cultivation. "I grow vegetables such as tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers and green peppers every year. Many of our employees do too," he said. Such hands-on experience is where new challenges are found, and this helps the company improve the technologies that are woven into new products, services and solutions for sustainable farming.

OAT Agrio is a member of the Sustainable Japan Network, a group of companies that cooperate with this newspaper to spread information about sustainability in Japan. You can also be part of the network; scan the QR code for more details.



Atonik is a plant growth regulator and biostimulant registered in many countries. OAT AGRIO

Green bond front-runner Tokyo keeps expanding their size, scope

Sustainable Japan Awards: ESG Special Award

HIROKO NAKATA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Few know a giant tunnel-like reservoir lies beneath central Tokyo. It was built just under Ring Road No. 7 to prevent the Kanda River from flooding during torrential rains — events that are becoming more frequent due to climate change. It temporarily retained 490,000 cubic meters of water when Typhoon Hagibis hit Tokyo in 2019, protecting the downtown from flooding.

This information comes from a 2023 impact report on bonds worth about ¥40 billion (\$275 million) that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government issued in fiscal 2022 to finance an extension of the reservoir and other green projects.

Explaining the purpose of the report, Kazumichi Saga, director of the bond section in Tokyo's Bureau of Finance, said, "We've reached the conclusion that it will be very important for us to improve the quality of our bonds and of ourselves as a bond issuer." The metropolitan government was awarded the Sustainable Japan ESG Special Award last year, sponsored by The Japan Times.

One of the reasons the award went to the city was its impact reports on green and social bonds, verified by external agencies — the first such reports by a Japanese municipality.

Tokyo has always been a pioneer of green bonds in Japan. When it issued its

first green bond in 2017, no other local government had ever done so. Since then, it has issued green bonds every year, and now it and as many as 20 other municipalities plan to launch the bonds this fiscal year ending on March 31, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Also at the moment, 36 prefectures and cities started to jointly issue a green bond. In addition to green bonds, Tokyo started to issue social bonds in 2021 to support its efforts on natural disaster prevention and social welfare.

Since the country's green bond market has grown in the last few years, Tokyo's role as front-runner prompted it to start publishing the impact reports last year. Saga said such reports, which explain how the bond issuer spends the money and how the financing affects its environmental goals, contribute to its accountability. "Transparency is particularly required amid the global focus on 'greenwashing,'" he said. "We issued the impact reports to secure transparency as well as objectivity, and for that reason obtained a second party opinion."

Tokyo's step was backed by the strong global interest in supporting the environment through investments. In Europe and the United States, regional governments had already started to issue green bonds in the early 2010s. In 2016, when Tokyo issued its Tokyo Environmental Supporter Bonds, a trial version of green bonds, investor appetite was so strong that they sold out.

Green and other ESG (environmental, social and governance) bonds opened a new way for local governments to procure money from investors.

But issuing ESG bonds is not an easy task. Transparency and accountability are required. Like many other ESG issuers, Tokyo faces tough feedback from institutional investors. For example, overseas investors often ask about how much green projects would reduce carbon emissions, or details on a population who would benefit from social welfare plans, Saga said.

Moreover, under Japanese regulations, the purpose of local government bonds is limited to financing for tangible projects such as public works. Municipalities cannot spend proceeds on operating facilities



The Yaguchi Special Education School's solar panels TOKYO METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT

or technological development. Tokyo's green bonds, for example, besides the reservoir extension, have financed the installation of solar panels on its facilities' rooftops to reduce carbon emissions. Tokyo aims to generate all of the electric power its facilities need from renewable sources by 2030. Its social bonds, similarly, finance projects to bury power lines and build housing for lower-income residents.

Tokyo's efforts to expand its range of ESG bonds continue. In the next fiscal year, it plans to increase issuances to a total of about ¥130 billion, Saga said, ¥20 billion more than this year.

Part of them will be "green/blue bonds," which will finance not only green projects but also those for marine life. Tokyo also plans to issue "sustainability bonds" to finance green and social projects in overseas bond markets to stimulate foreign investor appetite. The bonds will be denominated in foreign currencies and will be worth about ¥50 billion.

"We aim to invite considerable investor money from abroad while continuing to welcome investment from domestic investors," Saga said.

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainable efforts. To learn more, scan the QR code or visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/sjaward2023>



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Seawalls in Tokyo are regularly maintained TOKYO METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT