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sustainable japan

Hub connects innovators with investors, companies here and abroad

CIC Tokyo’s Victor Mulas helps startups thrive

Name: Victor Mulas
Title: Chief Innovation Officer,
Cambridge Innovation Center (CIC)
URL: <https://jp.cic.com/en/cic-tokyo/>
Hometown: Madrid, Spain
Years in Japan: 4

Leaders & Readers

LOUISE GEORGE KITAKA
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When the Cambridge Innovation Center opened its initial Asian base in Tokyo in 2020, it created a community designed to help startups thrive. CIC was founded in 1999 in Massachusetts to build such hubs connecting innovators with investors and companies.

Victor Mulas, the chief innovation officer of CIC, speaks with palpable pride about the base in Toranomon Hills. “CIC introduced the first large-scale shared space connected to international networks in Japan, offering expert support across domestic and overseas markets,” he said.

CIC Tokyo now hosts over 340 clients, with emerging ventures from around the

world working alongside larger firms and government offices, highlighting Tokyo’s rising profile as a global center for new business.

Transformational tools

An avid reader since his childhood in Spain, books sparked one of Mulas’ earliest connections to Japan. A title that left a strong impression was the Spanish edition of “Natsukashii Toshi e no Tegami,” a semi-autobiographical work by Kenzaburo Oe from 1987 that explores post-World War II Japanese society. (There is no English edition.)

Mulas moved to the United States as a young adult, where he joined the World Bank as an innovation specialist in information and communication technology. “I worked on programs exploring how transformational tools could support developing countries. My task was to identify such approaches, test them and, if successful, help scale them,” he explained.

His work also focused on building ecosystems for sharing knowledge. He notes that the term “ecosystem” is borrowed from biology, denoting a complex web of interactions, such as in the Amazon. “Innovation is about knowledge flows, and it has to be sustainable,” he said.

Meeting the world in Japan

Mulas came to Japan in 2020 with the World Bank as head of the Tokyo Development Learning Center, a partnership between the World Bank and the government of Japan. “Its mission was to share the country’s best practices with others,” he noted. “These systems are some of the finest in the world,

and my role was to bring delegations here to learn and then share these lessons globally.”

He arrived just as Japan was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which Mulas says became a catalyst for change: “Businesses adapted, and people began cooperating in new ways, creating fresh systems of collaboration here.” Mulas branched out into consulting and advisory roles with governmental, private and academic institutions.

Joining CIC was a natural progression, aligning with his experience and vision. He connected with CIC while still at the World Bank, after authoring a report on Tokyo’s startup ecosystem. His report included Venture Cafe, a nonprofit organization that supported early-stage entrepreneurs and is part of CIC.

“After stepping away from the World Bank, I wanted to support the country’s startup landscape,” Mulas said. “The potential here was exciting and reminded me of New York in 2010, in the Lehman shock era. There was world-class science and research, some of the best anywhere, but it was not being fully leveraged internationally.”

Fukuoka — a new global hub

While Tokyo seems a natural choice for the first Asian center for CIC, the recent opening of a second center in Fukuoka in June might seem surprising. However, Mulas says it was an obvious step.

“Fukuoka has long been at the forefront of new business creation in Japan. The city is young and dynamic, with a culture of entrepreneurship and regulatory sandboxes — controlled environments where companies



COSUFI

can test business models. They even have a concierge system dedicated to helping startups,” he pointed out, adding that Fukuoka is also one of the few cities in Japan where the population is actually growing.

Mulas emphasizes that large corporations must adjust their mindsets and learn to work effectively with entrepreneurs if they want open collaboration strategies to succeed in tackling major challenges. He says that innovation is spread across many regions, and companies should look well beyond Silicon Valley to find the right partners.

“The key is creating systems that are sustainable locally and can reach critical mass

with talent. Cities like Fukuoka show how this can be done. Japan has opportunities but must continue shaping its networks of collaboration in its own way,” he said.

The future is already here

Asked about his goals for the future, Mulas smiled. “It is already happening! Meeting leading creative minds from around the world and bringing them together. We are asking them, ‘How can we help you develop faster?’” As one example, he mentioned the Advanced Research and Invention Agency in the U.K., which is working on biotechnology and better interfaces between minds and

Expert on tech and innovation

Victor Mulas was born and raised in Madrid, Spain, before moving to the United States as a young adult. He earned an MBA from Georgetown University’s McDonough School of Business and subsequently joined the World Bank at its Washington headquarters in 2010, where he developed expertise in innovation, technology and global startup ecosystems.

He later moved to Japan to lead the World Bank’s Tokyo Development Learning Center, a role he held until 2022. Since then, he has continued to work in the startup space, advising the Japanese government and multinational companies on innovation strategies.

In early 2024, he became chief innovation officer of CIC. In his free time, he enjoys running, hiking and snow sports. He is also an avid reader.

computers.

Mulas is also nurturing young people in his team, helping them grow and preparing them to operate across borders. His team is global with presence in Japan, the U.S., the U.K., the Netherlands, Germany and the Gulf. “Japan has impressive scientific expertise that has largely remained local. The next step is to take it abroad, to elevate it globally — and that is part of my mission,” he said.

In closing, Mulas shared two mottoes that have guided him to this point. “Don’t ever stop dreaming. It brings out your inner child, and the best innovators tend to be big dreamers. And don’t ever stop believing. I often tell people in Japan that they should believe in themselves more.” He also mentioned Leonardo da Vinci, the “original innovator” whose boundless curiosity and imagination serve as inspiration for how he approaches the world.



Sustainable Japan Award — 2025 results

the japan times

Sustainable Japan Award

2025

In June 2021, The Japan Times merged its previously launched ESG Consortium and Satoyama Consortium into the Sustainable Japan Network. Its purpose is to support individuals, companies and organizations that have been working toward a sustainable society. Once a year, The Japan Times holds the Sustainable Japan Award, with both a satoyama section and an ESG section, to recognize and celebrate those who have made significant contributions. Here are this year’s awardees.

Grand Prize winner, ESG section

HANKYU HANSHIN HOLDINGS, INC.

For over a century, Hankyu Hanshin Holdings has built communities where people aspire to live, expanding from its railway business into real estate, entertainment and culture. Since 2009, the group has further underlined its role as a member of local society through the Mirai no Yume Machi Project, a wide-ranging social contribution initiative that fosters growth together with communities.

Guided by its Sustainability Declaration, the company has set ambitious

greenhouse gas reduction targets and promoted decarbonization through a shift to rail transportation and the development of environmentally conscious facilities. Landmark achievements include Japan’s first carbon-neutral station in the city of Settsu, the SDGs Train powered entirely by renewable energy, and Kansai’s first rail network to achieve full carbon neutrality. Beyond transportation, it has introduced innovative projects such as the Zero Carbon Baseball Park for the Hanshin Tigers’ farm team and the upcoming Grand Green Osaka, an urban development that integrates expan-

sive green spaces into the city center.

By linking transportation, real estate and cultural activities into a unified vision, Hankyu Hanshin has created a forward-looking model that balances corporate value with sustainable growth. Its pioneering initiatives exemplify how companies can partner with communities to build resilient and environmentally responsible urban futures.

Hankyu Hanshin Holdings, Inc.

Grand Prize winner, satoyama section

LIFESTYLE ACCENT INC. (FACTELIER)

Factelier has pioneered a transformative model for Japan’s apparel industry through its innovative Satoyama Platform, designed to sustain local craftsmanship while promoting fair and transparent production.

By partnering directly with factories and eliminating intermediaries, the company ensures fair pricing and superior quality while empowering regional manufacturers to build their own brands instead of remaining subcontractors. This

approach enables skilled artisans to pass down their techniques with stability, nurtures successors and creates employment opportunities for younger generations.

Equally important, Factelier shares the stories and values behind each product, cultivating a culture in which clothing is not simply purchased but cherished for the long term. Within just four years of its founding, the company achieved sales of ¥1 billion while continuing to pursue its vision of bringing world-class Japanese brands to global markets.

Factelier’s commitment extends well

beyond commerce. By fostering pride among artisans and forging emotional connections with customers, it contributes to the vitality of regional communities. By directly linking producers and consumers, the company has created an innovative and internationally significant model — one that preserves Japan’s traditional industries while offering a forward-looking blueprint for sustainable business worldwide.

• FACTELIER

ESG: Excellence Award winner

UNICHARM CORPORATION

Unicharm has demonstrated groundbreaking technology and results in the pursuit of a circular economy, becoming the first company in the world to commercialize horizontal recycling of used diapers. In 2015, it launched the cross-functional project Reff (Recycle for the Future) and the following year began pilot trials in collaboration with the city of Shibushi in Kagoshima Prefecture.

Unlike the conventional practice of

incineration or landfill, Unicharm’s unique ozone-based treatment technology allows for the complete recycling of all materials in used diapers. In 2022, the company commercialized adult incontinence products made from recycled pulp, and to date has recycled 5.46 million diapers. Full recycling is scheduled to be achieved by 2025. Looking ahead, Unicharm aims to expand the initiative to 10 municipalities across Japan by 2030, with ambitions for global deployment.



ESG: Excellence Award winner

GLIN IMPACT CAPITAL

Since its founding in 2020, GLIN Impact Capital has positioned itself at the forefront of Japan’s impact finance, guided by the vision of creating a society where economic growth and the resolution of social issues advance together. Combining impact investment with consulting, the firm supports the growth of companies addressing critical challenges such as climate change, health care and social inclusion.

The firm’s influence extends beyond

portfolio companies. By serving on committees for Japan’s Financial Services Agency and Ministry of the Environment, GLIN has contributed to guideline development and market formation, strengthening the country’s impact finance ecosystem. Balancing business results with institutional design, GLIN Impact Capital exemplifies a pioneering model from Japan, setting a global benchmark for how finance can drive sustainable and inclusive growth.



ESG: Special Award winner

HEALTH AND GLOBAL POLICY INSTITUTE (HGPI)

Founded in 2004, the Health and Global Policy Institute (HGPI) is a nonprofit dedicated to advancing “citizen-centered health care policy.” By convening diverse stakeholders in a neutral forum, it has consistently generated impactful policy proposals.

Among its most pioneering initiatives is the Planetary Health Project, launched in 2022, which integrates health care and environmental sustainability. The project has

influenced national reforms by proposing new components for the nursing education curriculum and contributing perspectives to Japan’s Basic Environment Plan. Internationally, HGPI has informed discussions at COP26 and helped pave the way for Japan’s participation in the WHO Alliance on Climate and Health. Through its ability to unite government, academia, industry and civil society, HGPI exemplifies how collective intelligence can drive systemic change.



Satoyama: Excellence Award winner

NAKAGAWA CO., LTD.

Nakagawa Co, Ltd., founded in 1916 in the Wakayama Prefecture city of Tanabe, has reimagined forestry with its pioneering concept of “forestry without cutting trees.” The company has built a new model of sustainable forest management through a wide range of initiatives: producing its own seedlings, introducing large drones to improve efficiency and safety, implementing measures against wildlife damage and creating employment opportunities for women.

One of its projects involves children collecting acorns, which are grown into seedlings and planted in collaboration with local disability facilities. Beyond social impact, the initiative offers significant environmental benefits. This model is already inspiring similar ventures nationwide, shifting forestry’s value system from purely economic returns to environmental and social value. Its open stance demonstrates how forestry can become both innovative and inclusive.



Satoyama: Excellence Award winner

YAMAROKU SHOYU CO., LTD.

Yamaroku Shoyu has played a vital role in preserving the centuries-old tradition of wooden barrel fermentation, safeguarding both Japan’s culinary heritage and its artisanal techniques. Under the leadership of brewer Yasuo Yamamoto, the “Wooden Barrel Craftsmen Revival Project” was launched to rescue the nearly vanished craft of barrel-making. Using domestically sourced materials, the initiative has brought together master artisans, students and residents of the island

of Shodoshima. Wooden barrels are living environments that nurture unique microbial ecosystems, producing soy sauce with unmatched depth of flavor while supporting broader fermentation traditions, including miso and vinegar. Yamaroku’s efforts represent more than preservation — they embody a forward-looking revival that blends tradition with contemporary innovation, offering a model of sustainability and cultural resilience that resonates far beyond Japan.



Satoyama: Special Award winner

NECCHU GAKUEN, GIA

Launched in 2015 with government revitalization grants, the Necchu School project has since expanded to 16 locations, totaling 15 across Japan and one in Seattle. It presents a pioneering model that fuses lifelong learning with regional revitalization, addressing social issues such as depopulation and the closure of rural schools.

By transforming former school buildings into hubs of education and community,

Necchu School creates spaces where people of different generations and professions — from business leaders and farmers to home-makers — learn and interact.

These encounters often spark new businesses, projects and collaborations. By reconnecting people with place and weaving education into community-building, Necchu School represents a unique model of social education plus regional regeneration.

