



Top: Children in Cambodia enjoy *furikake* rice introduced as part of a trial school meal program by the Japanese NGO Foundation for International Development/Relief (FIDR). The *furikake*, made by local mothers, received high praise for its deliciousness. FIDR  
Below: A Cambodian woman holding up her homemade *furikake*. FIDR

# JAPANESE FURIKAKE: ENHANCING THE NUTRITION OF CAMBODIAN CHILDREN

*Furikake, a familiar seasoning found on Japanese dining tables, refers to a powdered condiment made by drying such ingredients as fish, vegetables, or meat and sprinkling it over rice. While not yet widely known outside of Japan, a group of Japanese individuals is working to add furikake to the diets of children in Cambodia to improve their nutritional health.*

In Japan, *furikake* is a staple condiment, widely recognized for its versatility and flavor. Created by drying and finely crumbling ingredients such as fish and vegetables, it's a must-have for everyday meals and bento boxes alike. According to the International Furikake Association, headquartered in Kumamoto Prefecture, the origins of *furikake* are unclear, but one theory traces it back to around 1913 when SUEMARU Suekichi, a pharmacist in Kumamoto,

devised it as a way to address the food shortages and calcium deficiencies common at the time by powdering fish bones and sprinkling them over rice.

The same concept has inspired KUBOTA Mitsuhiro, a Japanese entrepreneur in modern-day Cambodia. Kubota farms and processes tilapia, a freshwater fish, for sale. Troubled by the high prevalence of malnutrition among children, alongside a growing number of overnourished Cambodian children consuming

readily available snacks high in fat and sugar, Kubota devised a solution to improve their nutritional balance: creating *furikake* using tilapia bones that would otherwise be discarded as waste.

At first, the strong fishy smell of the tilapia *furikake* made it unpopular. However, Kubota discovered that adding locally sourced white pepper masked the smell while enhancing the natural taste of the ingredients. Since too much pepper made the *furikake*



Left: *Furikake* introduced by FIDR will be made from smoked, locally caught fish. FIDR Center: The smoked fish meat is finely ground in a mortar. FIDR Right: A cooking class organized by FIDR in Cambodia, where local people learn how to make *furikake*. FIDR

too spicy, he continued refining the recipe until a blend was created that even children could enjoy.

In 2021, with support from the Nutrition Japan Public Private Platform (NJPPP), a Japanese public-private partnership framework promoting the improvement of nutrition in developing and emerging countries, Kubota conducted a study on 47 children to assess the nutritional impact of his *furikake*. Results showed that children consuming the condiment had significantly higher calcium intake than those who did not. Beyond the calcium provided by the *furikake* itself, the children also started eating more rice and side dishes, marking a positive shift in their overall dietary habits. Kubota explained, "While supplements are one option to address nutritional deficiencies, some locals are concerned about their safety. *Furikake*, on the

other hand, is made from local ingredients, making it a safe and trusted alternative."

Kubota's efforts caught the attention of the Foundation for International Development/Relief (FIDR), a Japanese NGO dedicated to improving food and nutrition, which reached out to him for advice on making *furikake* after showing concern about the lack of nutrition education in Cambodian schools, where children would buy sugary snacks and energy drinks at school stores. The organization developed Recommended Dietary Allowances, outlining necessary nutritional intake, and Food-Based Dietary Guidelines based on these allowances, detailing what and how much to eat for a balanced diet, which were approved as national guidelines in 2017. Starting in 2025, public elementary, middle, and high schools will implement nutrition education nationwide, with FIDR working in collaboration with Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport by developing curriculum and instruction manuals, writing textbooks, and providing training for educators.

In 2023, FIDR launched a rural development project in Cambodia aimed at improving livelihoods through the creation of local industries in three highly impoverished districts of Kampong

Chhnang Province. These areas face severe challenges during the rainy season, as farmland becomes flooded, making daily life difficult. By promoting *furikake* as a regional specialty, the initiative aims to enhance nutrition, revitalize the local community, and improve livelihoods. At cooking classes, participants not only learn *furikake* recipes but also gain insights into its health benefits, particularly the positive impact of *furikake*'s high fish content on nutrition. Trial servings of *furikake* rice were served at local elementary schools, introducing children to the pleasures of eating healthily.

FIDR Country Representative SAEKI Kazato emphasized, "Calcium deficiency is extremely high among Cambodian children, but *furikake* offers a simple way to increase calcium intake just by sprinkling on rice. Using locally sourced fish and seasonings ensures it's both healthy and delicious, highlighting *furikake*'s immense potential."

Kubota, too, envisions a future where *furikake* production expands beyond mere profitability. His ultimate goal is for the knowledge and skills to become widespread, empowering Cambodian families to prepare it in their own homes. Perhaps one day, the Japanese word *furikake* will become a household name worldwide.



Kubota Mitsuhiro fries fish bones in a pan to make *furikake*. MITSUHIRO KUBOTA