



Sustaining the Sustainable Development Goals





PRAKSIS is a semiannual publication of the Network for Social Democracy in the Asia-Pacific. It seeks to combine theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform the strategy of the progressive movement and help shape the policy direction that should guide the region's governments.

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Leave No One Behind

Realizing a Sustainable World



Image: www.japan.kantei.go.jp

Introduction

In May 2016, the Japanese government established the SDGs Promotion Headquarters, consisting of the Prime Minister as the head of the Headquarters, the Chief Cabinet Secretary and the Minister for Foreign Affairs as Deputy Directors, and all cabinet ministers. The Headquarters holds meetings twice a year.

In December 2016, the first “SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles” were formulated, which are medium- to long-term strategies for promoting the SDGs, and in December 2019, the policy was revised. In the revised version of the “SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles,” based on an analysis of the current state of Japan’s efforts over the past four years, the 17 goals of the SDGs have been restructured in accordance with the context of Japan, and eight priority areas were chosen.

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The eight priority areas are as follows:¹

1. Empowerment of All People
2. Achievement of Good Health and Longevity
3. Creating Growth Markets, Revitalization of Rural Areas, and Promoting Science Technology and Innovation
4. Sustainable and Resilient Land Use, Promoting Quality Infrastructure
5. Energy Conservation, Renewable Energy, Climate Change Countermeasures, and Sound Material-Cycle Society
6. Conservation of Environment, including Biodiversity, Forests and the Oceans
7. Achieving Peaceful, Safe and Secure Societies
8. Strengthening the Means and Frameworks for the Implementation of the SDGs

In order to accelerate the government's initiatives, a concrete “SDGs Action Plan” was formulated every year by all ministries and agencies, based upon the “SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles.” SDGs are promoted in terms of both domestic implementation and international cooperation.

In addition, from the perspective of emphasizing public-private partnerships, we have established the SDGs Promotion Roundtable, which brings together a wide range of stakeholders including the private sector, NGOs/NPOs, experts, international organizations, and various organizations, to exchange opinions and reflect this in government policies.

Social Recognition of SDGs

The number of people wearing the SDGs badge is increasing in Japan—although I have a feeling it has to do with companies encouraging their employees to wear the badges. But still, quite a few people will say that they have heard about SDGs before. The recognition rate of SDGs in Japan is around 80 percent according to various surveys, and it has risen by nearly 30 percent in the past year.

According to the “SDGs Achievement Ranking” by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), an international research organization,

Japan is at the top of the ranking, though with a downward trend, as other countries are catching up.

Successful Areas/Goals

What is important in the Japanese case is that in those areas, in which a high degree of achievement has been observed, Japan was already doing well before the SDGs goals were formulated. In particular, these are:

- Goal 4: Quality Education for All
- Goal 9: Resilient Infrastructure, Inclusive and Sustainable Industrialization, and Innovation
- Goal 16: Promote Peaceful and Inclusive Societies

These are all areas that postwar Japan has made much progress in.

It has also been pointed out that there is a lack of data in Japan. Of the three indicators set for “Goal 10: Reducing Inequality,” the Gini coefficient, which indicates income disparity, has not been updated since 2008. The Palma ratio, which shows the income ratio of the richest 10 percent and the bottom 40 percent of all households, and the poverty rate for the elderly, have not been updated since 2015. As for the six indicators of “Goal 12: Sustainable Consumption,” for the amount of electronics waste per capita there is only few data, not allowing any evaluation of the trend.

Mixed Results

On the other hand, “gender issues” and “climate change countermeasures,” which are often taken up as social issues in Japan, are gradually improving, but progress is very slow. A draft law on LGBT issues, which was expected to be enacted before the 2020 Tokyo Olympics held in 2021, was opposed by the Liberal Democratic Party just before it was submitted. In addition, although the bill to establish a Children's Agency was enacted, it was only allocated a very small budget and the word “family” was inserted into the agency's name, indicating a conservative interpretation of child policies and a lack of focus.

In addition, although interest in “climate change countermeasures” is increasing, especially among the younger generation, unfortunately it was not a

¹1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017). “Japan: The SDGs Implementation Guiding Principles.” Tokyo.



Image: www.telegraph.co.uk

“Gender issues and climate change countermeasures are gradually improving, but progress is very slow.

major point of contention in last year's House of Representatives election and in this year's House of Councillors election. Environmental protection has been my main goal in politics, but the environmental policies of the current government are completely inadequate. Although Japan was once said to be a rather “environmentally-oriented country,” this cannot be said anymore for the Japan of today.

I believe that the Ministry of the Environment should have the authority to impose restrictions on the activities of all ministries and agencies, but this is not the case. The Japanese policy of prioritizing “industrial growth” has not changed much since the period of high economic growth in the 1960s.

In terms of energy policy, Japan has always relied on nuclear power. The importance of the energy issue has become even greater due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and I have been warning that the government's “Basic Energy Plan” is too old-fashioned. Because earthquakes frequently occur in Japan, and because Japan experienced a major accident at Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant in 2011, nuclear power generation is difficult to gain the understanding of the public. At present, only seven reactors are in operation. Nevertheless, the government has continued to set the ratio of

nuclear power generation at a high rate of around 20 percent of total power generation. In contrast, the introduction of renewable energy has not grown to the extent that many people are hoping for. As Japan depends almost exclusively on foreign countries for fossil fuels, it is urgent to increase renewable energy in the near future.

However, Japan has neglected to do so, and now that energy supply is becoming increasingly severe worldwide, I believe that the danger posed by nuclear power accidents will again be ignored. This might lead to a restarting of more nuclear power plants under the SDG goal of “climate change countermeasures.”

But nuclear power is by no means “sustainable.” The issue of how to dispose spent nuclear fuel is unsolved, the enormity of the damage in the event of an accident is unaddressed, and the magnitude of the impact of genetic damage is still unknown. In Japan, more than 30,000 people are unable to return to their hometowns due to the accident at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Japan must never return to nuclear power, but must aim for a truly sustainable society. To what extent we can achieve the SDG goals through “voluntary efforts” is the real upcoming test.

Shortcomings

Among the 17 SDGs, the achievement rate in the following areas is particularly low.

- Goal 1, Elimination of Poverty: If we look at the “relative poverty” rate in Japan, 1 in 7 elementary school students lives in conditions of relative poverty.
- Goal 2, Gender Equality: The percentage of female members of the Diet is below 30 percent; gender disparity in wages is still severe.
- Goal 3, Climate Change: (I have explained above).
- Goal 4, Diversity of Marine Life: is decreasing and not actively protected.

- Goal 5, Land biodiversity: A reduction of protected land and inland water surfaces can be observed.
- Goal 6, Partnership.

There is some hope for some areas. For example, interest in gender equality issues is increasing, especially among “Generation Z.” There is also a tendency to participate in SDGs-related events and the intention to consume sustainable products and services.

We have many difficulties with the advancement of SDGs in Japan but we continue to work hard, and in solidarity with the international community, we hope we will be able to build a sustainable and peaceful society in which no one is left behind. I am convinced that we can overcome the difficulties we face by deepening cooperation among Asian nations. ■

“We can overcome the difficulties we face by deepening cooperation among Asian nations.”

Image: www.gcap.global



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