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SDGs and the COVID-19 Pandemic Civil Society Practices toward “Resilient Societies”

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“Transforming our world into a sustainable society free of poverty, leaving no one behind”

This is the philosophy underlying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the global guidelines adopted by the United Nations in 2015. We, the Civil Society Network on SDGs (SDGs Japan), aim to achieve the SDGs through the inclusion of diverse stakeholders from the perspective of civil society. In the midst of the pandemic that has transformed our society, "SDGs-centered measures" are necessary to achieve the principle, "no one is left behind".

1. Resilient society

Resilient society is one that is resilient to pandemics or disasters and is capable of immediate recovery and reconstruction. However, there are many people who do not have sufficient support and security due to inadequate social systems. Thus, there is a need to work simultaneously on supporting the individuals who are suffering and improving institutions to increase resilience. The following are some examples in which civil society has been involved.

2. Examples of practices involving civil society

Vulnerability

Foreigners: Foreigners living in Japan are facing problems caused not only by institutional barriers, such as status of residence and restrictions on welfare services, but also the lack of guarantees for the opportunity to learn Japanese and the stress of different cultures. In this pandemic, governments and civil society are working together to establish multilingual telephone consultation centers and provide free online consultations by lawyers and other experts. It is also important to encourage local people to help foreign residents who cannot access support information due to language barriers. In order to build a relationship among local residents, "easy Japanese tools" are being promoted and residents are encouraged to shorten sentences and use simple vocabulary which foreigners can easily understand.

Disabilities: We need to establish a resilient medical system that ensures the dignity of people who need constant medical care even in a pandemic or a disaster. Civil society, local governments and the private sector are working together to support people who are at risk when they go out, by providing shopping assistance and food delivery. Also, it is important to support employees with disabilities. For workers with disabilities who need a caregiver or who have difficulty with IT tools (such as those with vision or hearing impairments), the promotion of working from home limits their

job options. Also, many of the caregivers are women so that gender equality in job opportunities is needed.

Youth: Educational and job opportunities for young people are decreasing and they are also experiencing psychological pressure, which results in a wide range of impacts, and current safety nets are inadequate to deal with this. Also, the factors and degree of impacts vary by age, gender, region and affiliation. Youth-led civil society organizations (CSOs) have expanded their outreach, targeting teens and twenties, and have developed a social media-based consultation service and online platforms to promote communication among students. As a result of active petition drives, their voices have been reflected in policies such as an "Emergency Student Support Grant", which help students continue their studies, and the reversal of the suspension of study abroad scholarships.

Preparedness

Energy: The use of participatory and decentralized community-led renewable energy is essential in order to mitigate risks in a disaster. Local initiatives on energy projects have led to new partnerships between civil society and the private sector, promoting economic and social benefits to their communities. Also, an international network was established to facilitate this movement.

Disaster Reduction Infrastructure: Awareness of the "Sphere Standards", the international standard for humanitarian assistance, has been increasing, and the Cabinet Office's guidelines on operation of evacuation centers are being improved. In order to accommodate people in various situations and prevent gender-based violence, it is important to include women in decision-making processes of evacuation shelters and address hygiene issues. Hotels and commercial facilities are being used as evacuation centers, and support for home-based evacuees and unofficial small to medium sized evacuation centers is also being extended.

Local: It is essential to provide prompt and organized support at the local level. In Kumamoto, the "Hi-no-Kuni Conference", established after the Kumamoto Earthquake in 2016, has been strengthening coordination between governments, civil society, medical institutions, and other organizations involved in support activities and personnel development. This conference played an important role in the July 2020 flooding disaster. Hand books for evacuees and for volunteers were published, and some of them were written in simple Japanese for foreigners. As some areas do not accept supporters from outside the prefecture so as to prevent COVID-19 infection, CSOs are working to establish a system that guarantees CSO activities, as well as promoting the review of the COVID-19 testing and health care system.

Recovery

Education: In April 2020, approximately 90% of the students all over the world, equal to about 1.5 billion students, lost educational opportunities due to school closures. The Global Education Coalition, led by UNESCO, was established by more than 140 international organizations to ensure quality education. In August, international organizations, including UNICEF and CSOs, collaborated to publish a guidebook for realization of gender-equitable reopening of schools.

Local Communities: In the coastal areas affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, locals reviewed the role of the aquaculture industry. They worked to improve the sustainability of the local communities from the perspective of not only the impact on the natural environment and biodiversity, but also from the perspective of the labor environment and responsibility to the local community and through this, they acquired ASC (Sustainable Seafood) certification. Over the years, CSOs doing research have worked together with local governments, the private sector and communities to make progress toward a sustainable society based on local industries.

Education: According to a survey on environmental education published by Japan Environmental Education Forum, a CSO, more than 380,000 students canceled or postponed participation in environmental education programs this summer. There has been a serious decline in learning opportunities outside of school education. In addition to distributing online nature learning tools, CSOs are also developing projects to distribute original educational materials and picture books that can be worked on at home for poor families and children who need assistance and children who speak foreign languages. In addition to providing children with psychological support through picture books, CSOs also help them to continue their education by delivering school supplies such as notebooks and colored pencils.

As these examples show, civil society plays a role to directly support people in need in pandemics or disasters through research, community-based support and new practices. To promote diverse civil society activities, we are strengthening our infrastructure, including maintaining funding, and collaborating with other sectors.

At the same time, building a resilient society requires that social institutions continue to adapt to the changing environment and society. Through its advocacy efforts, SDGs Japan is calling for a multi-sectoral decision-making system based on gender equality, and we released the "[SDG Bottom-up Action Plan 2020](#)", a collection of policy recommendations from civil society.

SDGs Japan aims to realize a society where “no one is left behind” and especially at this time, we would like to once again propose “SDGs-centered measures” as a way to achieve this.

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