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SDGs and the COVID-19 Pandemic Civil Society Practices toward "Leaving No One Behind"

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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. Increasing number of people facing difficulties

COVID-19 is exacerbating existing social issues such as poverty and inequality, and vulnerable people are more likely to be impoverished. For example, the healthcare crunch is more risky for those who need medical care, such as the elderly and disabled people. In addition, gender gaps, such as the high percentage of women in informal employment and essential work, and the bias toward women doing housework, seem to be related to the increase in the number of suicides among women in October (up 82.8% from the same month last year).

[In our first statement in August](#), we addressed seven issues that COVID-19 has made apparent and [in our next statement in October](#), we introduced civil society practices working toward creating a "Resilient Society". In this statement, we focus on poverty, discrimination and inequality, as well as violence, and introduce civil society practices toward "Leaving No One Behind".

2. Examples of practices involving civil society

Eradicate poverty

Grassroots activities are essential to provide livelihood support to people in difficulty. Many civil society organizations (CSOs) provide emergency livelihood support and access to social security systems through food distribution and counseling services. However, some newly impoverished people are hesitant to receive public social security. It is important to create a social environment where people can access social security systems without hesitation.

The NPO, "Single Mothers Forum" supports about 2,000 single-parent households by sending rice and food to them every month and conducts regular questionnaires to understand the living conditions of single-parent households. These surveys have revealed the current situation of single-parent households in difficulties due to a decrease in income and they show that improvements are needed in support programs such as food banks.

Eliminate discrimination and disparity

People who need continuous medical care or have disabilities need support with adequate information, knowledge and skills, and it is essential to ensure that they have opportunities to receive appropriate medical care and care equipment. CSOs which aim to enhance disabled people's rights are proposing the improvement of social security and the correction of discrimination in the system. For example, the comprehensive support grant does not cover interpreters who perform tactile sign language working under the risk of infection. It is important to reflect the voices of the concerned parties and their supporters to improve the quality of support.

CSOs provide opportunities for outdoor face-to-face education and home study materials for children who are unable to take advantage of online learning due to the lack of IT access, poverty, or disabilities. It is important to guarantee learning opportunities for all children.

As part of disaster relief activities, many CSOs are distributing hygiene products to the elderly and disabled, and are also developing guidelines to assist people who are vulnerable in disasters. Listening activities, online health counseling to prevent isolation in communities, multilingual support, and children's learning support are also being strengthened.

With restrictions on crossing borders, governmental livelihood support is shrinking in many countries. NGOs are raising awareness of infection prevention and providing masks, soap, and other supplies to displaced people, refugees, people with disabilities, people at high risk of infection or serious illness, and people living in remote rural areas. It is also essential to maintain health services such as tuberculosis control and maternal care. In order to continue and strengthen international support, it is also important for the Japanese government to increase its financial support.

Eradicate violence

The National Action Plan (NAP) of the Global Partnership to end Violence Against Children (GPeVAC) includes COVID-19 measures in response to a request from CSOs. Save the Children Japan submitted a request to the government to protect children from abuse and corporal punishment.

CSOs engage in social support programs for girls and victims of domestic violence. There is an increasing number of consultations from women in their teens and twenties regarding domestic violence, pregnancy and other sexual issues. There is an urgent need to invest public funds and train counselors in order to expand the consultation system.

3. Advocacy

The Japan Youth Platform for Sustainability (JYPS), with the support of JOICFP and in cooperation with other youth organizations, submitted the "Proposal from Youth for the Public Comment on the Fifth Basic Plan for Gender Equality" to the government. From the perspective of youth who will lead the next generation, this proposal raises the importance of encompassing diverse genders and ages, and calls for the realization of gender equality and the eradication of violence in order to achieve an inclusive society.

At the Northeast Asia Civil Society Forum organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, CSOs from China, South Korea, Mongolia and Japan submitted proposals for international solidarity in all aspects of economy, society and environment.

In April 2020, CSOs working to achieve the SDGs issued a common declaration calling on the UN and governments to support vulnerable people. The declaration proposes the establishment of a COVID-19 recovery fund and the enhancement of social security.

SDGs Japan held a meeting with the ruling and opposition parties to exchange opinions on "SDGs and COVID-19" and made policy proposals to the SDG Promotion Headquarters Secretariat, raising the importance of "leaving no one behind".

Social transformation should be carried out with the guarantee of safety and security of all people. However, in this pandemic, inequality is worsening, and the number of people in difficulty is increasing. In order to realise an inclusive society, it is important to reflect the voices of the people who are directly affected.

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