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SDGs and the COVID-19 Pandemic Recommendations and the role of civil society

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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". SDGs Japan proposes the following:

1. Assessment of changes in the current situation from the previous statement (released on March 27, 2020)

In [our previous statement](#), we highlighted "SDGs as a guiding principle in this pandemic" and raised the importance of governance (openness, transparency, democratic procedures and partnership) and economic and social inclusion in policy-making. As of June, Japan's two supplementary budgets have included more than US\$540 billion in total for COVID-19 countermeasures. These budgets should be distributed in an equal and fair manner, under appropriate governance. In addition, the members of expert committees, which make policy proposals, must come from a wide range of sectors, and the various policies must be consistent with the SDGs philosophy. Also, it is important that these policies are open to the public and subject to a verification process in accordance with SDG 16.

2. Social issues that have emerged since the previous statement

Selection of life: Facing medical and nursing care collapse, with severe shortages of medical resources, there was an attempt to place value standards on life, such as removing the elderly from artificial respirators in favor of the young. Selection of life according to a patient's age, disability or social status violates respect for the dignity of the patient. It also became clear that the care system for individuals who require emergency measures in case of infection, such as the elderly or people with underlying medical conditions, is inadequate.

Social discrimination and prejudice: Cases of discrimination and violence have been reported due to prejudice against people in certain occupation or regions. This is partly caused by local governments and the media exposing personal information of people who have tested positive.

Environmental issues and disaster risk: There are concerns that the reduction in environmental protection and monitoring activities and the increasing demand for disposable products to prevent

infection could lead to long-term environmental problems. In a disaster, there are also concerns about the lack of medical supplies and shelters which are needed for vulnerable individuals.

Increased violence: Economic and social insecurity, changing lifestyles and shrinkage of care services have led to increased violence and abuse against vulnerable groups in society, including women, children, youth, elderly and people with disabilities.

Institutional systems for vulnerable individuals and minorities: The current system lacks consideration for gender and minorities. For example, the immigration system does not provide sufficient support for foreign trainees and exchange students facing unemployment and destitution. Also, foreign residents living in Japan face severe restrictions on re-entry if they leave Japan. In addition, the rights of partners of critically ill patients are not guaranteed in Japan, where same-sex partnerships are not recognized. There are also concerns about the growing education gap due to the lack of equitable online education.

Worsening employment situation: In June, the Labor Force Survey showed that the number of people who were totally unemployed due to "employee's reasons" increased by 1.9 times to 410,000 compared to the same month last year. Also, the number of people in part-time employment decreased by 1 million. There are concerns about the impact on women, especially single mothers, who amount to 68% of the part-time workforce. Even though there is an urgent need for employment and livelihood support, public and private support institutions are also affected by COVID-19. There are concerns that social support is not reaching those in need and that the actual damage is not fully understood.

International cooperation: High-quality multilateral aid, with guarantees of transparency and openness, and urgent efforts in bilateral aid for medical health and poverty alleviation are vital. Every country has diminishing funding and resources to achieve the SDGs, and NGOs that provide direct community-based support are facing challenges in terms of staffing and funding.

This pandemic, which has transformed our world, has made it clear that our existing social systems are not capable of addressing the complex social, economic, and environmental challenges that we face, and has brought about an urgent need for social transformation.

3. Social transformation and value change - case studies starting with civil society

Diverse movements for social transformation have begun to address the above challenges. Here are some notable examples of the implementation of the "no one is left behind" principle, in which Japanese civil society is deeply involved.

1. In order to support people who are facing unemployment and deprivation, or who are beyond the reach of the public support system, civil society organizations have begun to hold counseling meetings and provide food and shelter in various regions. By providing more options for support, we are strengthening the safety net for a diverse range of people in need.
2. Local SDG roundtable committees have been established to ensure that all residents, including essential workers, can live safely and securely. Some local governments have published proposals

for COVID-19 countermeasures based on the SDGs, which are also used as guidelines for reconstruction in the areas affected by the torrential rains of July 2020.

3. In Japan, civil society organizations are increasingly reaching out to companies and investors to address environmental issues and climate change. In some cases, civil society organizations have made shareholder proposals to help companies address climate risks, leading to inclusive social, economic and environmental change.

4. A framework for international cooperation to promote research and development of COVID-19 prevention, diagnosis and treatment, including provision to developing countries, has been established, and civil society is increasingly involved. Civil society appreciates the fact that the Japanese government is in a position to support international cooperation, and is calling for the necessary financial and technical support and transparency of contributions.

Also, the "[SDGs Bottom-up Action Plan 2020 \(En\)](#)," a collection of policy recommendations released by SDGs Japan, proposes policies that incorporate the SDGs perspective.

4. The role of civil society: Its position as an important stakeholder and its participation in decision-making

Three main roles of civil society in achieving the SDGs are:

1. The role of empowering those on the periphery of society and reflecting their voices in policy decisions which directly affect their lives;
2. The role of delivering needed support to people in difficult situations; and
3. Serving as a nodal point, bringing together various stakeholders.

SDGs Japan aims to realize a society where "no one is left behind" and proposes "SDGs-centered measures" now more than ever. We will continue to report on and spread our efforts and achievements in social transformation.

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