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**"The SDGs in the age of COVID-19"
Achieving a sustainable society**

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"Transforming our world into a sustainable society free of poverty, inequality and 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.

The SDGs are not a set of solutions to social problems, but a list of goals that we must achieve in order to realise a sustainable society, where no one is left behind. To transform current systems and put these systems into practice, we need action by everyone at all levels.

SDGs Japan has consistently proposed "COVID-19 responses based on the SDGs" through our four statements that have been published in 2020. Under COVID-19, challenges are emerging in all the SDGs goals, including urgent measures for health care, social security, guaranteed education and employment opportunities, governance and transparency of public administration, and efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. The impact on women is particularly serious.

SDGs Japan's COVID-19 Statement (2020)

27 March	Now is the time to take measures based on the principles of the SDGs
12 August	Recommendations and the role of civil society
21 October	Civil Society Practices toward "Resilient Societies"
15 December	Civil Society Practices toward "Leaving No One Behind"

At the same time, we need to work for medium- and long-term social change, looking ahead to 2030, the deadline for achieving the SDGs. In this statement, we make proposals which are necessary to realise a sustainable society under COVID-19, from the perspective of "economy, society and environment", which are considered to be three integrated and inseparable aspects.

1. Economy

In order to transform society, it is necessary to define our vision of society beyond economic development, and the participation of various stakeholders, including civil society, is essential for this transformation.

For example, the draft of the report for the sixth phase of the Basic Plan for Science and Technology (Cabinet Secretariat), which advocates "Society 5.0", describes the society to be "sustainable and resilient…, each person can realise diverse happiness" and this is "the same for the SDGs". The "Social Principles of Human-Centric AI" (Cabinet Office), published in 2019, calls for "a sustainable society that respects human dignity and embraces diversity". However, the process of policy planning and implementation towards the realisation of such a society is not sufficiently opened to civil society.

It is also important to evaluate how well we are achieving our goals. International indicators, for example, incorporate factors other than economic activity to assess living conditions and the degree of social development. For example, the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI) and the OECD's Better Life Index (BLI) include indicators such as "years of education" and "social connections". The policy process of making indicators which evaluate items that are in line with an ideal society is progressing. The BLI, based on 2018 data, shows that 14% of people in Japan would fall into relative poverty if they had no income for three months, raising the risk that many people would fall into poverty in an emergency situation such as COVID-19. The same is of course true for SDGs global indicators: it is important to understand the current challenges using data which are newly developed for better understanding to formulate effective measures to achieve the SDGs.

Guidelines on economic activities have been developed both in Japan and abroad. Domestically, in October 2020, the government launched the National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights, which includes civil society, companies and trade unions in the development process. The plan calls for states to be responsible for protecting individuals from human rights abuses by companies, and for companies to respect human rights in their business activities. The plan also calls for a guarantee to access aid for human rights abuses. Human rights abuses include, for example, long working hours, disparities in working conditions for foreign workers, violations of consumers' right of privacy, and the challenges of job insecurity due to gender inequality that have emerged under COVID-19. SDGs Japan, together with other organisations that are members of the Business and Human Rights Civil Society Platform, will commit to ensuring that this action plan is implemented in society.

Internationally, guidance standards such as ISO 26000 (social responsibility) and ISO 20400 (sustainable procurement) have been published. In Japan, there is a growing trend to assess the sustainability of local communities as a basis for economic activity by adopting not only environmental protection and quality assurance, but also the perspectives of compliance with workers' rights and local job creation as evaluation indicators for certification systems for agricultural, livestock and fishery products and the timber industry.

2. Society

Under COVID-19, social isolation due to reduced opportunities for face-to-face communication, because of, for example, teleworking and school closures, has become an issue, and direct support through listening activities and food aid has become increasingly important. In order to guarantee the direct support activities of civil society organisations (CSOs), there is a need to deepen the understanding of local communities regarding CSOs and at the same time to support local authorities.

Regional SDG Indicators are being developed as a roadmap for all sectors to work together in community development. Administration, residents, companies and academia have been joining in the formulation process, and there are discussions of COVID-19 measures based on sustainability. SDG Japan's member organisations are also working on a project to develop regional SDG indicators.

In order to achieve the SDGs, we also need to address non-economic issues such as lack of access to information and disparities and inequalities in educational opportunities, which are key to breaking the cycle of economic poverty. On the issue of information poverty and inequality, for example, we need to examine whether the benefits provided as emergency measures under COVID-19 are reaching the people who need them. People with visual or hearing impairments, or whose mother tongue is not Japanese, who have less access to official information tend to be more likely to need help. In line with the SDGs' principle of "putting the furthest people first", it is important to improve social security and ensure that people have the means to access it.

3. Environment

In 2020, the Government declared Japan would aim to be carbon neutral by 2050 and the number of municipalities in the country that have declared virtually zero carbon dioxide emissions for 2050 reached 330, over 18% of the total number of municipalities in the country (24 March 2021). Internationally, 126 countries, representing 51% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, have declared or are planning to declare a target of virtually zero emissions (United Nations Environment Programme: Emissions Gap Report 2020).

The negative social impacts of the climate crisis vary in degree according to geography, industrial structure and individual attributes such as gender, age and lifestyle, and the emphasis should be on supporting vulnerable groups. For example, it has been pointed out that women are more severely affected by climate disasters. The Fifth Basic Act for Gender Equal Society, released in December 2020, states that the perspective of gender equality should be reflected in the policy-making process and specific initiatives in response to environmental problems.

In the agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries, which are closely linked to the environment, it is also important to address sustainability. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' "2020 Census of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries" (approximate figures), the number of agricultural and forestry enterprises has decreased by 21.9% since the last survey (2015), and among individual enterprises, which account for 96.4% of agricultural enterprises, 69.5% of the workers are aged 65 or over. Internationally, the

United Nations' Decade of Family Farming (2028) is promoting measures related to family farming with the aim of passing on culture, conserving biodiversity and eradicating poverty. The SATOYAMA Initiative, an international partnership adopted in 2010, aims to realise a society in harmony with nature through the sustainable use and management of biological resources.

The risk of zoonotic diseases, such as new coronavirus infections, is said to be increased by environmental degradation and the destruction of biodiversity. The Aichi Targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity concluded that none of the targets had been fully achieved at the global level by 2020, the target year. It will be important to agree on and ensure the effective implementation of the next International Biodiversity Framework, while maximising synergies with the climate crisis measures.

In the context of these trends towards the transformation to a sustainable society, behavioural change by everyone is required in the interrelationship between economy, society and environment.

It is also important to ensure the participation of a wide range of stakeholders in the review of the basic plans, such as the Basic Energy Plan and the Basic Act on Suicide Prevention, scheduled for 2021.

In the spring of 2021, SDGs Japan will publish a collection of policy recommendations from civil society to achieve the SDGs, which will propose policies to solve the social issues raised by COVID-19.

SDGs Japan proposes that now is the time to realise a society where "no one is left behind" and to implement "COVID-19 measures based on the SDGs". We will continue to strive for social change rooted in the activities of civil society and to share our work and achievements.

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