



SDGs Strategy in the Era of COVID-19: A Grand Vision to Overcome the “Crisis of Sustainability” Is Needed

The progress of SDGs has stalled or regressed in the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet if we compare COVID-19 to each of the SDGs, the SDGs become a “compass in times of crisis.” From health to governance, the SDGs are a “mindset” in a world living with COVID-19.

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In September 2019, the “Sustainable Development Goals Summit” was held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Concern was expressed that the progress of the SDGs was lagging behind and that if the situation continued, many of the goals would not be achieved by the deadline. The Summit resulted in the adoption of a “political declaration,” setting the next ten years as the “decade of action” to achieving the SDGs. At that time, we still did not know what was to come. We did not know that in New York City alone, home to the UN Headquarters, close to 500,000 people would be infected with COVID-19 and 25,000 people would die (ed. close to 1 million infected and more than 33,000 dead as of July 25, 2021). Worldwide, approximately 88 million people have been infected, and more than two million lives have been lost. The annual death toll from COVID-19 has far outstripped that from tuberculosis, the infectious disease responsible for the largest number of casualties worldwide in recent years, with around 1.4 million deaths in 2019 (ed. close to 194 million infected and more than 4 million dead as of July 25, 2021).



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The SDGs had been slow to make progress from the outset, but have been hit even harder by COVID-19. In the education sector, 1.6 billion children and youth have been affected by school closures and more than 400 million lack access to online or other alternative means of education. The number of deaths from AIDS, which had been ranked as the most important health challenge of the twenty-first century, was reduced by almost two-thirds in a twenty-year period, but access to medicines and services has been disrupted due to lockdowns and other factors. It has been predicted that the number of deaths could increase by more than 500,000, particularly in the region of Africa to the south of the Sahara Desert. If this happens, the death toll will be on a par with that of 2008 and all the efforts made so far could be in vain.

As the world’s attention is monopolized by COVID-19 and as global connections, including air networks, are divided by border closures and people become more focused on their own countries, many SDG issues are being abandoned. If this situation continues, it will be a total setback for the SDGs initiative itself, and “eradicate poverty and realize a sustainable world” may largely recede into the distance. In the new context of the pandemic, the value of the SDGs needs to be redefined and reformulated.

The deepening of a chronic crisis invites an acute crisis

It must be remembered that COVID-19 did not appear for no reason. Like other new infectious diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), AIDS, and Ebola Virus Disease, COVID-19 is an

“amphixenosis.” Factors responsible for its introduction into human society include biodiversity loss, which has changed the way humans interact with animals. This has resulted not only in COVID-19 but in many other new infectious diseases. Like climate change, biodiversity loss is a chronic “crisis of sustainability” originating in humans that is undermining the planet. It must be recognized that the chronic crisis of sustainability is not a random occurrence, whether it be climate change and biodiversity issues linked to the relationship between humans and nature, or poverty and inequality issues originating in the society and the economy. The deeper the chronic crisis, the more it invites a chain reaction in the form of acute crises like COVID-19. It is these acute crises that are destroying human lives and livelihoods, and a response that simply treats the symptoms is not enough.

Two chronic crises may be said to have greatly amplified the impact of COVID-19. The first is growing global obesity and the increase in non-communicable diseases. The second is the decline in capacity of infectious disease countermeasures and public health policies due to the privatization of healthcare services and public investment cuts. These crises have surfaced with COVID-19, with the urban poor in developed and middle-income countries suffering the greatest damage. Obesity and non-communicable diseases were already prevalent in this population due to its dependence on junk food and soft drinks, so when COVID-19 infiltrated, large numbers of people became seriously ill all at once. Already lean public health services that had been pared back due to privatization and cuts in public spending were unable to cope, and a collapse of the healthcare system resulted.

A chronic crisis not only invites an acute crisis, but also weakens resilience to that crisis. A society undermined by the crisis of sustainability has already lost the resilience to counteract an acute crisis. What we must do in the face of the acute crisis that is COVID-19 is strive to restore resilience against the acute crisis in parallel with its symptomatic treatment, with the aim of overcoming the crisis of sustainability in a synergistic manner.

Rediscovering SDGs as a “compass in times of crisis”

In this scenario, the SDGs take on a different guise than usual. In the face of COVID-19, we rediscover the SDGs for the first time as a “compass in times of crisis.” The SDGs became the global goals to be achieved by 2030, replacing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which called for the reduction of global poverty by half. Like the MDGs, the SDGs set targets and deadlines and used indicators to measure progress. However, the targets and approach have changed significantly. The selective approach to issues that characterized the MDGs has been replaced with an [inclusive and] comprehensive approach, encompassing not only development but also the environment, the economy, and the governance of nations and the international community. This was a reflection of the intensifying “crisis of sustainability” due to factors such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

The SDGs have another aspect. The goals were formulated over a three-year period from 2012–2015 through diplomatic negotiations at the United Nations, with input from UN agencies, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), and civil society, including indigenous peoples, youth, women, and people with disabilities. In other words, the SDGs are realistic goals that have passed through rigorous “clinical trials” through diplomatic negotiations and guiding instruction from the UN and relevant organs. Therefore, in the face of the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19, we cannot afford not to employ the SDGs as a “compass in times of crisis.”

If we place COVID-19 in the center surrounded by the seventeen SDGs, then establish the link between COVID-19 and each goal, the universal classification encompassed by the seventeen goals provides a comprehensive picture of the kind of impact COVID-19 can have on the world. So how do we tackle it? The principles are set forth in the Transforming our World declaration, a document adopted by the United Nations that incorporates the SDGs. The philosophy of “Leaving No One Behind” and principles such as the Multi-stakeholder Process and respect for human rights are not mere lip service or slogans. These values have been clearly stipulated because it is essential if we are to confront and overcome the crisis that is undermining the world that they be turned into reality. The SDGs can also be used as a compass for ending the acute crisis of COVID-19.

Adhere to the spirit of Sustainable Development Goal 16

How, then, can the SDGs be used to end COVID-19? I believe the key is to be found in Goal 16, which has received little attention in Japan. Goal 16 relates to governance, including access to fair justice, prevention of corruption and bribery, and guaranteed freedom of speech. Particularly noteworthy are Targets 16.6 and 16.7, which stipulate how government agencies should be governed, including transparency and participatory decision-making.

Among the countries in East and Southeast Asia and Oceania, which are relatively less affected by COVID-19, Taiwan, New Zealand, and South Korea have been cited as successful. The COVID-19 measures implemented in these three countries have a great deal in common.

First, these countries had developed laws and national strategies to deal with the pandemic based on the lessons learned from their experience of the most recent pandemics of SARS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), or novel influenza. When COVID-19 escalated, this enabled the efficient and focused implementation of public health policies such as containment and prevention in a coherent manner, through border closures, rapid expansion of domestic testing, and isolation.

These three countries have also succeeded in ensuring openness and transparency when it comes to their focused public health policy initiatives by having national leaders and ministries in charge develop coherent communications with the wider public, through both traditional and social media.

The story of Digital Minister Audrey Tang, who overcame the problem of mask supply using information technology and skillful communication to relieve public anxiety in Taiwan, where “universal mask wearing” was enforced early on, is well known in Japan. New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern secured public support for hard and painful lockdown measures by appealing through coherent messaging, firstly on the rationale for the policy, and then on the need for social solidarity. As the results of the measures became evident, Prime Minister Ardern used a phased communication strategy, imparting a sense of public pride in what had been accomplished before presenting the next goal. In this way, she achieved active public participation.

Meanwhile, in the early stages of COVID-19, the government of South Korea established the “Three Principles of COVID-19 Measures” of transparency, openness, and participatory decision-making, seemingly unrelated to infectious disease control. This shows that the country’s government understood from the early stages that establishing governing principles for COVID-19 measures was a top priority. Moreover, when the disease spread to the country’s gay community, which had suffered prejudice and discrimination, the government lost no time in engaging in intensive dialogue with community leaders,

conducting anonymous testing once again to ensure the community's active participation in tracing the clusters.

Taiwan, New Zealand, and South Korea did not necessarily have the SDGs in mind when they implemented COVID-19 measures. However, the implementation of the measures by these three countries shows that not only SDG Goal 3 that relates directly to COVID-19 healthcare policies but the SDGs more broadly, in particular the principle of “governance” in Goal 16 (Target 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels and Target 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making), function very effectively.

Japan's diplomacy needs a vision to overcome the “crisis of sustainability”

Japan's diplomacy has a role to play in ensuring that the efforts of SDGs are redoubled during the COVID-19 pandemic. The SDGs are a set of goals to overcome the “crisis of sustainability” and pave the way for a transition to a sustainable society. The risk that a deepening of the chronic “crisis of sustainability” would invite a major acute crisis like COVID-19, significantly slowing down the progress of the SDGs, should have been incorporated into the initial design of the SDGs. It is also important to keep in mind the possibility that humanity has already missed the final opportunity to achieve a “sustainable society” in an unswerving manner, and that COVID-19 is just the prelude to a new narrative confronting humanity.

Be that as it may, we must not abandon the SDGs because we are up against a complete regression in their progress due to COVID-19. On the contrary, this is precisely the point where we need to affirm the SDGs as the basic strategy to bring COVID-19 to an end and as the compass for overcoming the crisis of sustainability. Having made every effort to ensure that “Human Security” is at the basis of the SDGs, and having remained committed to the SDGs following their formulation, Japan is able to demonstrate leadership in reaffirming the global will to achieve the SDGs.

Furthermore, Japan's diplomacy must make every effort to reduce the global impact of COVID-19. Just over a month after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic in March 2020, the international community developed the “Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator,” which integrates the development of new technologies to contain the pandemic and global access to those technologies, as well as successfully establishing the “COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP),” which promotes innovation through the sharing of intellectual property rights. However, the ACT Accelerator faces a funding shortfall of 2.5 trillion yen through 2021, and the C-TAP is struggling to gain support from developed countries and corporations.

We must acknowledge that the pandemic poses the greatest threat to national security. The death toll from COVID-19 in the United States has already surpassed the death toll from World War II. At the present time, total annual military expenditure worldwide is 200 trillion yen. Surely, we could consider using a little over one percent of that to fund countermeasures against the world's greatest security threat that is COVID-19?

This unprecedented threat calls for a radical proposal to urgently invest a portion of the funds earmarked for national security to bring COVID-19 to an end. Instead of clinging to existing social and economic structures, we should make the utmost effort to optimize the rules of security, trade and investment, concentrating on the mobilization of resources and the restoration of confidence in national and global governance on the part of the nation and its citizens, in order to end the acute crisis and

overcome the crisis of sustainability. While Japan has not always been skillful when it comes to envisioning and leading new structures at historical turning points, it should be possible to play the role of facilitator in such a process of change. Above all, what Japan's diplomacy needs now is a change in mindset that is not intimidated by the abyss that we have glimpsed in COVID-19 but rather recognizes it as an opportunity to forge a new path toward a "sustainable society."

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