

**Kaze, June 2020**

**Japan needs to empower civil society**

**Konoe FUJIMURA**

The COVID-19 pandemic expanded globally in a short time, depressing the economy, and our society. While appreciating those devoted workers including medical people, I am asking myself if there is anything I can do as a long-time advocator of a sustainable society.

Probably, we (our environmental NPO) should serve as a compass to show the direction to be taken and keep on proposing a new way of life after the pandemic. Reviewing the pandemic experience, we could identify the real issues of the current society and discuss among us how our future life should be. With this in mind, we will continue the discussion to enhance the capacity of society in the face of climate change as well as infection. We will make the COVID-19 experience a good opportunity to take an action toward empowered civil society.

So far, we have been discussing the role of civil society from the environmental viewpoint. Now through the corona pandemic, I came to believe more firmly that we have to protect the life and property ourselves. We should not leave everything to politicians, government officials, or experts. Individual citizens must face social issues together with their family members, co-workers, and the members of their community.

However, I know civil society in Japan is still weak in its capacity. Of course, a lot of individuals, groups, private companies, and local governments are making great efforts to save needy people, but such activities have not made civil society powerful enough. The weakness of civil society reflects in our slow actions to combat environmental issues including the climate crisis.

Among various reasons behind the weakness of Japanese civil society, I specifically pay attention to the lack of civic education. Historically, the general public in Japan has been "excused" from public affairs forcing them to leave

everything to the government. Consequently, Japanese people, in general, do not seem to be fully conscious of their social responsibilities.

As regards the future of humans, Prof. Yuval Noah Harari of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem says that we may need to choose between a surveillance society and an empowered civil society, between an independent and nationalistic state or a country open to international cooperation. To choose the right path and realize civil society backed by international cooperation, he argues that the following two attitudes are quite important for the general public: i) to select, from the sea of abundant information, reliable information with a sound scientific basis, believe it, and put it into action, and ii) to watch political situation under any circumstance and try to participate in politics.

In this context, the current situation in Japan looks far behind. For example, NPOs, almost 20 years after the NPO law was enacted, have not obtained equal status with the government or business enterprise (market). The government provides massive subsidies to private companies, but little support to NPOs except for social service organizations. This is a stark contrast with NPOs under the EU where environmental NPOs are considered public entities. The EU government regards environmental NPOs as a key partner to tackle the environmental issues, working together with the business associations. In Japan, on the contrary, even the Ministry of Environment or politicians do not recognize the importance of NPO activities.

Japan has been criticized by the international society for its backward attitude in the combat against global warming. Japan has been a boat anker, exporting coal-fired power plants, and promoting nuclear power generation. It's a shame that Japan has not signed the treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons, and is yet to ratify the Aarhus Convention.

The current government has decreased the credibility of government information due to its loose document management and the foggy implementation of the disclosure system. They made science-based information a political issue, and it is difficult to obtain credible information. There was a report that Japanese people's confidence in scientists and scientific information is extremely low compared with that of other countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that such social issues as infections, as well as global warming and disparities, are not resolved only by the government and the business. The involvement of individual citizens and the local community is the key to the solution. To empower civil society and promote self-governing ability, I think it is absolutely necessary that the Government of Japan should step forward and renew the current education system.