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Let's apply lessons we learned

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It is ten years since the Eastern Japan Great Earthquake and the following Fukushima nuclear accident took place on March 11, 2011. I do not have firsthand experience of the disaster, but still, I cannot forget the fear and the feel of crisis.

At that time, the word "beyond expectation" was frequently used. However, big earthquakes took place repeatedly in this country since old times. Specifically for Fukushima, scientific data expected a huge tsunami. The TEPCO experts and related people, if they were sensible enough, could have foreseen the accident. But the members of the closed group called "the nuclear community" were overconfident of the strength of the nuclear generation plant, neglected scientific data, and did not take necessary measures. The economy-first attitude promoted their negligence. The Japanese government has been overseen such attitude of TEPCO and did not provide information appropriately to the public, partly because nuclear power generation is a national project. This critical negligence brought about that catastrophic accident, suffering not only the people of Fukushima but all succeeding generations. This is a man-made disaster, but still, political responsibilities are blurred. The responsibility of TEPCO is not clear even today. Some people are still having difficulties in their daily life but no reasonable solution has been provided as of today.

Nowadays, the government started to shift toward a decarbonized society, but even such a seemingly positive trend conceals a potential danger. Nuclear power generation remains on the policy agenda and the current government is secretly moving forward to continue the plant. Uncontrollable nuclear technology and irresponsible/unethical inward-looking nuclear policy..... How can we trust such a government?

We all must have learned from Fukushima how dangerous nuclear power generation is and how precious it is to be able to lead a normal daily life. Now,

after ten years from the terrible accident, how many of us still remember what we felt at that time and apply a lesson learned from that experience?

We are now suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic all over the world. Again, this is what we could have expected from what we learned in the past. According to Prof. Taro Yamamoto of the Institute of Tropical Medicine, Nagasaki University, various viruses have been existing on this planet well before the appearance of human beings and pandemics will take place when we fail to do well with the virus. However, economic globalization has been impelling land development and we might have stepped into the area where we should not invade.

Again, the economy-first policy of our government (previous and current governments reduced the number of local public healthcare centers) brought about healthcare collapse and many overwhelmed hospitals. It seems that the government is trying to balance the economy and our lives! Unfortunately, some of us citizens are taking unethical attitudes, too. They seem to forget that our actions form our own society, and are taking egoistic or discriminatory attitudes toward those infected by the COVID-19. (Things are the same for the victims of Fukushima.)

In the meantime, climate disasters took place in various parts of the world. Again, this is a man-made disaster which is the natural consequence of the science-belittling economy-first attitude and of the insatiable human desire for wealth deeply ingrained in current political, social, and economic spheres.

However, the climate disasters are slightly different from the Fukushima and the COVID-19. While the latter two occurred suddenly, in a sense, and therefore the government could only take ex-post measures, the climate risk is foreseeable and there is room to take co-beneficial measures. For example, an orderly increase in renewable energy generation will help reduce nuclear energy generation. Freezing excessive land development or efforts to prevent permafrost in the polar region from melting will reduce the possible appearance of new infectious diseases. We don't have much time left, but at least we have some more time to discuss and take action. It is time that we apply what we learned from the Fukushima disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government of Japan should develop clear-sighted policies based on IPCC's accumulated scientific knowledge. They need to recognize the closedness and the limitation of the industry-academia-government commissions and seek collaboration with NPOs/NGOs. Citizen participation would be a key to democratic policymaking, and NGOs/NGOs could provide the government with a profound knowledge base on their abundant on-site experiences and above-interest attitudes.

The corona pandemic and recent big natural disasters highlighted the important role of local governments. For climate risk management, too, local government and community people should work together to come up with the best available policies for their own community life.

When developing implementation plans, the current system of the economy should be reconsidered because it is not sustainable. As we observed in the past months, the COVID-19 curfew brought about bankruptcy or business cutback, forcing many people to lose jobs. The measures taken will eventually expand gaps and inequality among us. It is almost impossible to start up a decarbonized society based on a growth-oriented existing economy.

The government of Japan, as stated in its long-term strategy, heavily relies on technological development to achieve the goal of realizing a decarbonized society. However, technologies will not solve all problems. Mega technologies backed by politics and capitals, or such unproven new technologies as Climate Engineering should not be employed without enough deliberations. Rather, existing solid technologies should be selected through close examinations to make sure if it is controllable and if it really makes people happy.

More importantly, we should look into our own lives and choose what is really important and what brings us real happiness. Helping each other and sharing altruistic values are something that we definitely need. We must recognize that the economy-first attitude and our endless material desire will generate social disparities and confusion, and end up afflicting people all over the world. We have to change our lives now and we have to do our best to make a change. Of course, education should be the basis of all these attempts to change our society.

Since Prime Minister Suga's pledge last October to eliminate net CO2 emissions by 2050, both national and local government officials are busy formulating new business plans to comply with the pledge. At this critical moment, I would like to say out loud that we should not leave everything to government officials and experts, but learn and think altogether, and participate in discussions to realize the society that we want. It is the very nature of democracy. Let's join local discussions for a sustainable future.