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Decarbonization without “growth strategy”

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Prime Minister Suga’s speech at the Leaders’ Summit on Climate convened by President Biden in April accelerated decarbonization in Japan. At a meeting of the Central Environment Council held in late April, members (including myself) were requested to provide comments (for only 3 minutes) on the new policy designed by the Ministry of the Environment based on Mr. Suga’s promise of 46%-50% GHG reduction by 2030.

The Council as a whole welcomed the renewed target but requested to show the basis of the argument as well as the actual measures to be taken. They also pointed out the need to listen to the voices of the people. Some members from the industry sector still argued that the use of nuclear and fossil power generation is unavoidable because renewable energy cannot fully supply the necessary amount of energy, but the majority agreed that we need to make best efforts toward a new decarbonized society, emphasizing the need of civic education and elaboration along with necessary institutional modification and technological innovation.

To achieve the aggressive reduction target, we have to try harder than ever before. Among others, the energy issue connotes various institutional challenges. In Japan, people do not choose renewable energy because it is priced high. This is partly because people do not fully understand the urgent need for decarbonization. However, what is behind is our government's economic policy in favor of big businesses. It is not conspicuous, but actually, they wish to maintain the nuclear power generation and coal-fired power generation.

The government vision of the decarbonized society mentioned above indicates that the decarbonization of goods and services will promote lifestyle innovation. However, we have never lived in such a society. To shift smoothly to a new decarbonized lifestyle, we have to fully recognize why we need to be

decarbonized, what is the decarbonized society we wish to build, and then take **action** together to realize such a society.

It may not be so easy to live a decarbonized life in reality. The report entitled “1.5-Degree Lifestyles: Targets and options for reducing lifestyle carbon footprints” <https://www.iges.or.jp/en/pub/15-degrees-lifestyles-2019/en> tells us how our life will be if we choose a decarbonized life to achieve the 1.5-degree target of the Paris agreement. I have practiced a simple way of life, but even for me, the lifestyle indicated in the report sounds fairly demanding.

To act on our initiative, we need a system to cultivate proactive citizens. Education for citizens, and citizen's participation in policymaking would be necessary. At the said Council meeting, we proposed a citizen's meeting on climate, but unfortunately, Japan's Ministry of Environment does not show much interest in such activities. Rather, they frequently use in the past few years such terms as “decarbonized society-the strategy for growth” and “carbon pricing contributing to the strategy of growth”, which I felt uncomfortable with.

It is almost 50 years since the Limits of Growth was reported and the finite nature of natural resources was widely noted. To decarbonize our life by 2050, we have to change the way of doing things. We have to stop seeking quantitative growth and measuring economic development by GDP. The issue here is how we can change the quality of growth. The Fukushima nuclear disaster 10 years ago and this COVID-19 pandemic could have triggered momentum for the change. However, the government of Japan failed to show its strong will to make such a fundamental change and separate itself from the concept of GROWTH.

In the meantime, responding to Greta Thunberg, many young people joined the climate action to appeal climate crisis we are facing. Climate justice they are claiming is an expression of anger. These young people are angry at what the developed countries have done to pursue economic growth, at their profit-oriented conduct which resulted in serious climate disasters, and at their unethical attitude of passing the bills to the developing countries, the poor, and the future generations. They raise their voices against the current economic and social system that is depriving the future generation of the common resources on this

finite earth. They are requesting to change this unequal, outrageous, and unethical global economy.

We, the older generations, are heavily responsible for the current state of the world, and therefore should support these young people. We should think hard and take action together to change conventional ways of life/consumer attitudes. Specifically, political and economic leaders are expected to show their determination to shift away from pursuing economic growth. We should never allow them to talk about nuclear power generation as a necessary measure to achieve the reduction target. It is against climate justice and environmental ethics.

Last March, the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany made a landmark decision that the existing Federal Climate Change Act is partly insufficient and has to be amended because it might infringe the basic rights of future generations. Chancellor Merkel quickly responded and announced the new reduction target to achieve net-zero CO₂ by 2045.

In Germany, the Ethics Commission, soon after Fukushima, recommended swift phase-out from the nuclear power generation. This time, the judiciary accepted a part of the claims made by youth, and the government followed the judicial decision despite the criticism from businesses. Compared with Japan's poor system of checks and balances, I cannot but highly admire the public organizations in Germany which are independent of the authority and take an action based on their mission and justice. After Germany's example, Japanese people should try hard and take action to build an ethical and fair system.