

KAZE, September 2021

Time goes like a spiral

Tomohiro TASAKI

Succeeding to Mr. Saburo KATO, three researchers, including myself, will join Ms. Konoe FUJIMURA and write for this column "Kaze" regularly from this September. Just for self-introduction, I am a researcher of the National Institute for Environmental Studies (NIES) and serving as a Director of JAES21 (Kanbun).

In his last "Kaze," Mr. Kato expressed that JAES21 needs fresh and new perspectives to keep pace with the fast-changing world. As my response, I would like to share my view regarding the Green Civilization that Mr. Kato and we, the JAES21 members, are seeking.

What will change and what is unchanged

Our society has drastically changed in the past two decades, and we are fully aware of the change. Despite the change, Mr. Kato is consistently and patiently delivering the same messages. They are the *importance of nature, potential threat to the very basis of life, and expectations for the new civilization (Green Civilization) where appropriate measures are ingrained in the society.*

The consistency of his message probably comes from his strong belief in JAES21's approach to environmental issues as a whole. JAES21 does not seek a stopgap remedy but definitive care of the environment by reflecting on our ways of life. In other words, JAES21 has tried to look at not specific symptoms but the underlying cause of current environmental issues viewed from the standpoint of "civilization."

This attitude and viewpoint will remain our central philosophy. At the same time, however, we should observe the changing world as it is. We saw history repeat itself, but actually, we have moved up to different stages in the past. Thus our society has evolved in spirals. Unless we realize the difference of each stage, we never design the Green Civilization for the future. Having the above in mind, let me envisage critical issues of the future Green Civilization referring to two recent significant changes in our society.

With the widespread of digital technologies, the style of communication has

dramatically changed. SNS allows us to communicate with each other even during the stay-home period of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, such social media became a dominant power in putting out our voices irrespective of the correctness of the information. Then comes the post-truth world, where people could be easily manipulated by false information often anonymously scattered. The gap from those who deny the existence of environmental issues is becoming wider and wider. However, if environmental NPOs enthusiastically fight back, they will be labeled as extremists and shunned by the general public.

In the digitalized society where the relationship between people or organizations has dramatically changed, something underlying the civil society and the media has changed as well. Except for digital native generations, people will have difficulties in adapting to those changes. Under these circumstances, how should environmental NPOs extend their activities in the future?

The second significant change has appeared in environmental policies, with two big trends in the past two decades. The one was the specialization of expertise. Today's unsolved environmental issues (climate change, resource circulation, biodiversity, and risks for exposure to chemicals, etc.) were not solved because the solution is complicated and requires specific expertise for their solution.

The other is the global trend of transforming the basic social system that causes those serious issues. In fact, the term "transformation" is used in UN's SDGs documents unanimously approved at the UN summit in September 2015, emphasizing it as one of the four points of SDGs. However, the concept of "transformation" is missing from Japan's principle of SDGs implementation guidelines. Alas! Where will unchanged Japan go in the future?

Transformation requires a change not only in individual action and awareness but also in social systems and rules. In the past two decades, however, the Japanese government, rather than employing a powerful economic approach, mostly took a voluntary approach trying to change behaviors of individual citizens through awareness-building.

The voluntary process neglected to face the structural issue of human society that causes environmental problems. Instead, the Japanese government placed responsibility for addressing those problems to the efforts of individual citizens and companies. At the same time, they relied heavily on technological development but did not see the possible rebound effect of technologies.

Transformation to the decarbonized society requires solid and clear environmental policies to lead the country. Under the current regime, can we transform Japan and shape appropriate policies for the next generation? The true worth of Japanese people is tested.