

KAZE, November 2021

Responding to the Carbon Neutral “wind,” NPOs should blow a New Kaze (wind)

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I am a researcher of the National Institute of Environmental Studies (NIES) and joined the team of Kaze writers this month. I was born, raised, and studied in Osaka and started my research career at NIES in 1998. Years of collaboration with JAES 21 made me aware of the importance of communicating specialized scientific knowledge with ordinary people in plain language. In other words, I was fortunate enough to have an opportunity to practice science in a social context.

The role of NPOs to realize a carbon-neutral society

Japan’s GHG reduction target was enhanced in the past few months, declaring that Japan will reduce 46% by 2030 and become carbon-neutral in 2050. However, ongoing Japan's decarbonization efforts are not sufficient enough to achieve the target.

The carbon budget indicates how much carbon we have generated so far and how little we can generate in the future if we wish to keep the temperature increase below 1.5 or 2 degrees. In 2004, NIES started the 2050 Project led by Dr. Shuzo Nishioka to envision a decarbonized society where 80% of GHGs compared with 1990 are reduced by 2050. At that time, people doubted that we could reduce such amount of GHGs, but nowadays, the Paris Agreement requests us to reduce more.

For GHG reduction, the current plan of the Japanese government emphasizes innovative technologies. However, a technological solution will blur our vision and prevent us from seeing how our economic and social life is related to the natural environment. It could cause another environmental issue. It is vital to building an environment that will lead us to choose appropriate actions based on the correct understanding of climate change issues. It will take time, and unfortunately, we do not have much time left.

Of course, it is not an easy task. Even today, we have not fully understood what the life-threatening COVID-19 pandemic teaches us. Without understanding the ongoing crises, can we take future issues sincerely/seriously even if we need to

achieve Zero emission for our children and grandchildren?

Today, following the Paris Agreement in 2015, we see various new trends in Europe and Asia. Developing countries started to present a long-term strategy referring to carbon neutrality. In response to those global trends, Japanese businesses and local governments are gradually becoming active. Then, can we expect another domino effect toward a zero-emission society like what we saw in Japan's antipollution measures in the 1960s? The next few years will be critical to achieving the target.

Indeed, we need a gale of "Kaze (wind)" of NPOs coming from the bottom up, merging with the top-down national policy, to ensure those new trends. It will help transform consumers' behavior and, thereby, social structure. Now is the time for NPOs to show their ability to envision an attractive decarbonized society. If successfully done, efforts for realizing a carbon-neutral society will become a mainstream attitude, not just an idea of fringe groups. It will receive empathy from the public and gain their strong support.

Unfortunately, many of my university students have little understanding of "carbon neutrality by 2050". Over the past few years, youth representatives are beginning to have opportunities to speak at such meetings as those of the Central Environment Committee of Japan. However, although many young people recognize climate change issues per se, they are not interested in immediate issues like the current emission reduction target.

To my surprise, however, once they know the urgency to tackle climate crises, they start to put out various exciting ideas. I wish they maintain this positive attitude and keep thinking actively about the climate issues toward the year 2050. To support the next generation's efforts, we will communicate with correct data/information and continuously provide a platform to discuss how to achieve a carbon-neutral society. I want to join all of you to boost the recent gale toward carbon neutrality luckily started to blow last year.