

Time to Consider Subtraction-Based Policies

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The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has placed global oil supplies under severe strain. In fiscal 2023, fossil fuels—oil, coal, and natural gas—accounted for more than 80 percent of Japan’s primary energy supply, with oil alone representing approximately 35.7 percent. Crucially, over 90 percent of Japan’s oil imports originate from the Middle East. Because energy is indispensable to modern socioeconomic activity, the impact of these supply disruptions extends far beyond industry and transportation. It directly affects everyday life by driving up the costs of food, healthcare, and countless other necessities. At a time when households are already struggling with inflation worsened by a weak yen, these rising energy prices are placing immense pressure on family budgets.

So far, government efforts have focused almost exclusively on securing additional energy supplies and preparing for shortages to prevent economic deterioration. In contrast, no consideration has been given to reducing demand during supply constraints. Indeed, it was not until late March—more than a month after the conflict broke out—that calls for energy conservation finally emerged from government and industry leaders. Even now, the fundamental direction of Japan’s energy policy remains unchanged: expanding overall energy consumption.

In other words, despite its stated commitment to building a decarbonized society, the government continues to pursue expansionist measures. These include securing new fossil-fuel import sources, restarting additional nuclear power plants, promoting next-generation reactors with unproven commercial viability, and expanding AI data centers that will drastically increase electricity demand. Many consumers likewise regard rising energy consumption as a natural consequence of pursuing convenience and a higher standard of living. Even today, relatively few people are willing to reduce unnecessary consumption or make meaningful changes toward a low-carbon lifestyle.

The Cognitive Bias Toward Addition

A well-known study published in *Nature* in April 2021 suggests that when attempting to solve problems, people instinctively favor adding new measures rather than removing existing ones, regardless of the problem's nature. The researchers argue that because the human brain evolved to respond quickly to immediate risks, it relies on cognitive shortcuts that favor addition over subtraction.

Yet, Japan has long cultivated a distinctive sensibility that might be described as an **"aesthetics of subtraction."** Haiku, for example, is the world's shortest form of poetry, conveying vivid landscapes and deep emotions in just seventeen syllables. By stripping away unnecessary words, it captures the essence of an experience with remarkable brevity and depth.

Living in an island nation with limited natural resources, the Japanese historically sought to minimize waste and maximize efficiency. This fostered a cultural tradition of eliminating excess and focusing only on what is truly needed—a form of wisdom that finds beauty, richness, and meaning in simplicity. Furthermore, influenced by Shinto and Buddhist traditions, the Japanese have long viewed human beings as an integral part of nature, recognizing that life depends fundamentally on water, air, and soil. This perspective embodies a deep appreciation for living in harmony with nature, contrasting with Western traditions that have historically viewed nature as something to be exploited. This worldview is beautifully reflected in expressions such as *taru wo shiru* ("knowing what is enough") and *sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu* ("all things in nature, including plants and the land itself, possess the potential for enlightenment").

The Cost of Endless Expansion

In modern society, however, the pursuit of material prosperity has become the dominant value. It is now widely accepted to extract additional resources whenever shortages are perceived—even when doing so depletes assets that should be preserved for future generations. As a result, the world is saturated with unnecessary goods and services, while the natural environment continues to deteriorate through climate change, plastic pollution, and biodiversity loss. Moreover, excessive dependence on information technology and artificial intelligence may be eroding our most essential human capacities: the ability to think critically, reflect deeply, and devise creative solutions. Consequently, society appears to be shifting

toward a hyper-competitive, dog-eat-dog world that widens the gap between the rich and the poor.

While many challenges can be addressed through “addition”—more investment, innovation, and resources—environmental crises demand the opposite. Reducing consumption is often the far more effective solution. For instance, curbing the production and consumption of energy-intensive goods and services—such as electricity and gas supply, automobiles, and plastic packaging—can significantly reduce both carbon emissions and waste. Likewise, eliminating unnecessary chemical substances protects human health and ensures a cleaner, safer environment for future generations. True sustainability requires a shift in perspective. Rather than continually asking what more we can produce, consume, or acquire, we must ask what we can do without, what we can simplify, and what we can reduce.

Redefining Prosperity: “Small Is Beautiful”

Some may argue that reducing consumption undermines economic growth and prosperity. The government’s persistent emphasis on increasing energy consumption reflects this very assumption—that higher consumption equates to wealth, and that economic expansion is the ultimate purpose of society.

A powerful counter-perspective is offered in *Small Is Beautiful* by E. F. Schumacher, a foundational text of modern environmentalism. Drawing on the principles of Buddhist economics, Schumacher argues that consumption is merely a means to achieve happiness; therefore, the ideal should be to maximize well-being with the minimum possible consumption. He further suggests that because resources are finite, people who satisfy their needs with relatively fewer resources are less likely to clash over them. Likewise, self-reliant communities are less vulnerable to the disruptions and geopolitical tensions born from excessive international trade. These observations seem remarkably prescient today. Schumacher’s message challenges us to redefine success: genuine wealth may not be found in endless production, but in resilience, sufficiency, and living well within planetary boundaries.

Fortunately, public attitudes in Japan may already be moving in this direction. The National Survey of Family Income and Expenditure and Living Conditions, conducted annually since 1986, indicates that the Japanese understanding of prosperity has evolved significantly. Since the material affluence of the 1980s, public priorities have

gradually shifted from material wealth toward emotional fulfillment and quality of life. More recently, this trend has deepened into a focus on holistic well-being, encompassing happiness, life satisfaction, and social welfare.

A nationwide public opinion survey conducted by *The Yomiuri Shimbun* and the Japan Institute of International Affairs (March 25 edition) further supports this shift. It found that many Japanese envision a future where the nation maintains high public safety, provides robust social welfare, contributes to global peace, and deeply values the environment. These findings demonstrate a clear preference for a peaceful, secure, and sustainable society over one focused solely on economic expansion.

A Catalyst for Change

Japan has already demonstrated its capacity to adapt during crises. Following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident, citizens nationwide made extraordinary efforts to conserve energy, successfully navigating a period of severe uncertainty. This experience reminds us that societies are fully capable of profound change when circumstances demand it.

It is estimated that if everyone on Earth consumed resources at the same level as the average Japanese citizen, humanity would require **2.8 Earths** to sustain itself. This stark reality illustrates how dangerously close we are to our planet's ecological limits.

The current oil crisis should therefore serve as a catalyst for systemic change. Japan must reconsider a framework that spends roughly ¥30 trillion each year on imported fossil fuels, and instead accelerate the transition to domestically generated renewable energy. At the same time, citizens must embrace the importance of reducing unnecessary consumption.

Ultimately, this crisis is not merely a hardship to be endured, but an opportunity to reimagine prosperity itself. It offers a chance to build a society where people live securely and with a genuine sense of well-being while respecting the limits of our finite planet. The challenge before us is not how to secure more energy, more goods, or more growth. It is how to create a society that enables human flourishing with less. In an age defined by ecological limits and geopolitical instability, the wisdom of

thoughtful subtraction may prove far more valuable than the pursuit of endless addition.

(Translated by Hideyuki MORI)