Eliminating Wasteful Consumption

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While the scars left by the devastating earthquake of ten years ago have yet to disappear, another major earthquake has struck Kumamoto, claiming the lives of nearly 40 people as of this writing. Many others have been affected and are being forced to endure extremely difficult conditions, including the intense summer heat. My deepest sympathies go to all those who have suffered.

Japan has always been prone to natural disasters, and earthquakes such as this one, as well as increasingly severe heatwaves and torrential rains driven by human-induced global warming, have long been predicted. Yet the government invariably responds only after disasters occur and has failed to take appropriate action on problems whose occurrence could have been foreseen. This can only be described as governmental negligence.

This summer, temperatures of 40° C or higher were recorded in many parts of Japan, while scorching heat also continued across Europe. We have entered an era in which people's very lives are at risk from extreme heat. Nevertheless, economic development projects continue unabated in Japan.

For example, the Governor of Shizuoka Prefecture has agreed to the construction of the Linear Chuo Shinkansen, a project that consumes enormous amounts of energy and raises concerns about both its economic viability and safety, thereby paving the way for full-scale construction. Data centers, which consume vast amounts of energy and water and impose a substantial environmental burden, are also being built in many parts of the country, frequently causing conflicts with local residents.

In the Musashi-Kosugi area of Kawasaki City, where I live, high-rise condominiums have proliferated. This has raised concerns about inadequate disaster preparedness, such as the risk of flooding, as well as rising temperatures in the surrounding area caused by waste heat from these buildings. Little consideration seems to be given to the fact that, several decades from now, all of these structures may become waste, leaving behind enormous quantities of concrete waste.

According to the latest Population Projections for Japan released by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, Japan's population will

continue to decline, reaching approximately 87 million by 2070. At the same time, the population will continue to age, with people aged 65 and over expected to account for 38.7% of the total population by 2070.

Meanwhile, according to the United Nations' World Happiness Report 2026, Japan ranks 61st among 147 countries, the lowest among the G7 nations. Although Japan ranks relatively high in terms of health and economic prosperity, its low individual satisfaction and social tolerance are cited as factors behind its relatively low ranking.

Thus, in Japan where the population is shrinking and people seem to be finding less happiness, development projects that further degrade the environment and consume resources—the very foundations of all life and socioeconomic activity—continue to move forward. The current government, too, is pursuing aggressive fiscal expansion that prioritizes economic growth over the protection of human life.

In the May issue of Kaze, I advocated what I called "Subtraction-Based Policies." This time, I would like to go a step further and call for an end to wasteful consumption. Of course, I am fully aware that the climate crisis will not be dealt with by such measures aimed at reducing wasteful consumption alone. Yet in a situation where we cannot expect much from politics, it is important to continue making policy proposals while, at the same time, immediately putting into practice whatever individuals and the private sector can do themselves.

Eliminating Wasteful Production

Among the industrial sectors responsible for the largest amounts of CO_2 emissions, I have recently become particularly concerned about waste in manufacturing. Food waste is already widely recognized as a problem, but what brought this issue home to me was a visit last year to a solar-panel recycling plant, where I saw large piles of unused panels waiting to be recycled.

I was told that these panels had entered the legitimate recycling system and that there was no legal problem involved. Nevertheless, discarding and recycling brand-new products is extremely wasteful when we consider the total amount of energy consumed throughout their life cycle, from manufacturing to processing and disposal.

One reason for this waste lies in outdated commercial practices that have emerged from the era of mass production. Examples include Japan's "one-third rule" for food products, under which retailers are expected to receive products within the first third of the period between their production date and expiration date. Another example is the commercial practice surrounding "outdated models" of white goods (home appliances): when a new model is released, the market value of the previous model rapidly declines, and products may be discarded even though they remain perfectly usable.

In addition to making appropriate adjustments to production levels, I believe we should urgently reform such outdated commercial practices in order to reduce the waste of resources and energy associated with production.

A few years ago, Hideo Hayashi, Chairman of Bushu Kogyo, which received the "Environmental Management Capability Award," often spoke about how eliminating waste from its production processes had proved highly effective not only environmentally but also economically. This principle has now been thoroughly embraced by the company's employees as well.

Eliminating Waste in the Use of Internet Services

As consumers, there are many situations in which we can reduce waste. What I have become particularly conscious of recently, however, is the waste of resources associated with our use of the Internet. Even simply watching a movie on a smartphone consumes energy, but the resource consumption associated with the use of AI is on a completely different scale.

As a layperson, my rough understanding is that those who realized that the conventional form of capitalism—producing a wide variety of goods by consuming vast amounts of resources and generating profits from them—was reaching its limits turned their attention to information technology (IT) as the next major market and developed what we now call artificial intelligence (AI) on that foundation.

They created platforms where people could connect with one another, with companies, and with data, and generated enormous profits by taking a share of the flows of money and revenue from advertising that pass through these platforms.

Represented by companies such as GAFAM, this industry has grown to become one of the world's largest in terms of market capitalization.

I recently tried generative AI myself after being encouraged to do so. I was immediately struck by how impressive its responses were, and my instinctive reaction was, "This could be addictive." At the same time, I felt uneasy that if this technology became widespread, human–to–human dialogue might become unnecessary, eventually undermining both human beings and society itself.

In reality, however, many people are already using AI to obtain knowledge and information, generating enormous profits for the information industry while consuming vast amounts of energy and water for cooling. Many companies and individuals spend long periods using these services without being conscious of these inconvenient facts.

I certainly do not intend to reject the development of information technologies such as IT and AI altogether. Nevertheless, I am deeply concerned that services that are not necessarily essential to human survival are placing enormous burdens on the environment and resources that are indispensable to our survival. I am equally concerned that these technologies may cause people to stop thinking for themselves, intensify friction within local communities, and widen economic inequality.

Around this time, leading figures in the US AI industry reportedly appealed to the US federal government, warning that AI could become uncontrollable if development continues at its current pace and calling for international efforts to slow the pace of AI development. I cannot help wondering whether such efforts will come in time.

At the very least, however, we need to recognize that the casual and seemingly harmless use of AI may, without our realizing it, contribute to environmental degradation and undermine both individuals and society. If we are to avoid losing what truly matters, I believe that, at the very least, we should stop using AI wastefully.

(Translated by Hideyuki MORI)