

Report: International Seminar on “Climate Change and SDGs: In and Behind the International Stage and Japan”

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1. Introduction

The 26th Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is being held in Glasgow, UK, starting on October 31st this year. From Japan, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, fresh from a general election, rushed in to give a speech about Japan’s goals.

Climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are also related to the frequency of natural disasters, have become critical policy issues for the international community in the 21st century.

Taking up this timely theme, the International Study Group on Sustainable Regional Revitalization at the Institute of Disaster Area Revitalization, Regrowth and Governance invited Dr. Kiyotaka Akasaka. The international seminar was held on Friday, October 1, 14:00–16:00, at the Institute’s conference room in a hybrid face-to-face and Zoom format.

2. Lecture Overview

The speaker, Mr. Akasaka, is a prominent former diplomat of Japan who has diverse experience in international organizations. He participated as a key executive member of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, in which Japan played a crucial role. He also served as Deputy Secretary-General of the Secretariat of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris. In February 2007, he was appointed by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as Under-Secretary-General for Public Information. As head of the Public Information Department, he oversaw UN Public Information Centers around the world, including information strategy and communications. In his speech, he introduced some interesting anecdotes about the negotiations between countries over climate change and SDGs in the international arena, as well as the roles played by international organizations. The lecture consisted of (1) Climate Change: International Framework and Recent Related Events, and (2) the SDGs 2015–2030. The following is a list of the items that caught Okada’s

attention.

Kyoto Protocol of 1997

Akasaka described an exceptionally uplifting experience. At the same time, upon reflection, (1) the agreement was rushed, even though there were many unknowns, such as greenhouse gases, sinks, and emissions trading; (2) it was limited to legally binding protocols and reduction targets; (3) developing countries were given a free hand, including voluntary participation; and (4) the way the burden was determined by the developed countries was arbitrary.

Paris Agreement, 2015

The Paris Agreement, the successor to the Kyoto Protocol, was agreed in Paris in 2015 at the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC (commonly known as COP), which discussed international agreements on greenhouse gas reductions. Akasaka cites the following points as problems with the Paris Agreement: 1) common long-term targets were only about efforts, not results; 2) with the unfeasible national targets of 1.5 to 2 degrees Celsius, it will not be possible to achieve the goal of limiting increased temperatures; 3) national greenhouse gas emission reduction targets are not legally binding; 4) there are no compliance rules or penalties; and 5) the targets for China and India are too low.



SDGs Adopted in 2015

These were unanimously adopted at the UN Summit in September 2015. To achieve a sustainable, diverse, and inclusive society where “no one is left behind,” 17 international goals were established for the period ending 2030.

The principles were established as universality, inclusivity, participation, integration, and transparency. All countries, including developed countries, will act. All stakeholders will play a role to ensure that “no one is left behind,” reflecting the philosophy of human security. The initiative includes social, economic, and environmental efforts. There will be regular follow-ups.

Mr. Akasaka also mentioned the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the predecessor to the SDGs, to which Japan has made a significant contribution. Japan was the creator of the numerical development goals (MDGs and SDGs). This began with the 1996 OECD Development Goals.

Japan's Potential Contribution

Mr. Akasaka mentioned air pollution control, energy conservation, medical health care, education, traffic control in large cities, waste disposal, food loss control, preservation of biodiversity in places such as forests and oceans near towns, low birthrates and aging populations, mass disaster prevention and relocation promotion projects after the Great East Japan Earthquake, and experiences in creating naturally diverse rivers.

“Can I do without it?” (Jane Goodall)

He concluded his lecture with this question posed by the British animal behaviorist and UN peace ambassador.

3. Q&A Session (Examples)

How do we communicate that the SDGs are not only about economic growth but also about the environment, human rights, poverty, and peace in an international and comprehensive manner, and that this is an issue that developing countries desperately need to address? Japan should also take advantage of its steady performance in overseas assistance.

The fact that there is a movement away from coal in utilizing natural energy, but that it does not lead to a shift away from nuclear power, is troubling.

The SDGs are important goals that I agree with, but how will they be achieved in practice?

There are more and more young people who see the global environment situation as dire, and a new generation of young people aspires to a way of thinking and living that is not bound by global capitalism. How do we draw on the wisdom of their drive to change things in the future? SDGs are not only about reducing consumption and saving money but also about fundraising to create a new style of living and working.

Finally, “What kind of country should Japan aspire to be? Is it no longer realistic to be an economic superpower, and should Japan aim to be a respected middle power?” The seminar covered a wide range of topics.

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