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Individual Efforts to Comply with the Sustainable Development Goals



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ABSTRACT

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are specific guidelines from 2016 to 2030 outlined in “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. Currently, various efforts are being made to achieve the SDGs at the level of government, local governments, companies, and individuals in Japan. The content feels very good in theory, but it's unclear if it can be done sustainably. The potential hindrance to mutual achievement is also concerning. In this article, we introduce what the SDGs are, focus on the efforts at the individual level, and discuss whether they can be adopted permanently.



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INTRODUCTION

Recently, even in Japan, the term sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has become a common term in various media such as television, newspapers, and magazines¹⁾. You may also see a part of it being discussed through a TV project. However, many people may not know the details. SDGs are specific guidelines from 2016 to 2030 outlined in the “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. It consists of 17 goals, 169 targets, and 232 indicators, and promises to "leave no one behind" on Earth. Japan is currently actively working towards the achievement of SDGs. Before the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000 had 8 goals and 21 targets²⁾. It was an international effort to eradicate poverty, promote gender equality, and prevent the spread of epidemics such as HIV. The SDGs were released as the successor to MDGs. Currently, in Japan, various efforts are being made toward the achievement of SDGs at the government, local government, corporate, and individual levels. The content seems very good, but we are not sure if it can be sustained. The potential hindrance to mutual achievement is also concerning. In this article, we introduce what the SDGs are, mainly focusing on the efforts at the individual level, and discuss whether they can be adopted permanently.

What are SDGs?

An overview is shown in Table 1. The 17 goals comprehensively represent the three challenges that the world is facing: 1) social development agenda, such as poverty, hunger, and education, which is yet to be resolved, 2) an economic agenda in which all countries aim for sustainable economic growth, such as effective use of energy and resources, improvement of working styles, and elimination of inequality, and 3) environmental agenda that should be tackled on a global scale such as global environment and climate change²⁾. The SDGs aim to build a sustainable and better future while integrally achieving these 17 goals that can be grouped under these three aspects of society, economy, and environment.

Its predecessor, the MDGs, was primarily a goal for developing countries. The opinions and intentions of developing countries were hardly reflected in the MDGs, and the idea was that developed countries would take the lead in solving the problems of the world. However, there was a great deal of opposition from the developing countries, making it difficult to achieve the

goal²⁾. In 2015, developed countries revised their existing policies and developed a new agenda that fully incorporates the opinions of developing countries so that there is no regional bias in achieving the goals. The SDGs¹⁾ is the outcome of this agenda. To avoid following the same route as the MDGs, the SDGs suggest a universal goal that all countries, including developed countries, should work on. These goals are difficult to achieve by the efforts of the governments of each country individually. A major feature of the SDGs is that the contribution of everyone, including businesses, local governments, academia, civil society, and even local individuals, is required. It is said that the key to achieving the SDGs is left to the actions of each individual^{1),2)}.

Efforts by companies and private organizations for the SDGs

The efforts of the private sector, as well as the government, are indispensable for achieving sustainable development. Through SDGs, the attitude of companies to engage in business is also being questioned³⁾. The corporate behavior charter of the Japan Business Federation also reflects the SDG's philosophy. With the existence of such a charter, the number of companies in Japan that have adopted the SDGs philosophy and put them into action is gradually increasing¹⁾. For example, in line with the second goal of “Zero Hunger” in Table 1, efforts by food companies to reuse waste generated in the production process as compost and feed are typical examples of incorporating SDGs into corporate activities. In addition, under the idea of the fifth goal (Gender Equality), various companies are increasingly promoting the recruitment of women and supporting their promotion to managerial positions. Furthermore, strengthening the development of products with excellent energy-saving functions contributes toward the 13th goal of climate action¹⁾.

Including the SDGs philosophy as part of corporate activities is not only a social requirement but also an action that has great benefits for the company. Measures with the SDGs in mind will help in improving the corporate image, and result in improved business performance and securing excellent human resources. However, to include the SDGs in corporate activities, each employee must have a proper understanding of the essence of the SDGs³⁾. Even if it is a social request to work on the SDGs, if the activities are easily adopted, they may be regarded as unrealistic and further criticized. The process of improving the understanding of SDGs among employees and then strengthening the efforts toward SDGs achievement is important. Efforts to enhance related

training and lectures within the companies, such as holding workshops and seminars on SDGs, will be required. Moreover, it is equally important to activate internal communication so that employees can discuss SDGs. Such efforts and internal systems will spread the SDGs to each employee and will lead to the sublimation of the SDGs philosophy that benefits the company. SDGs are issues that all employees should tackle as a company³⁾. In addition to such recognition, it may be necessary for the company and organization to point in the same direction by creating an organization in which the philosophy and action guidelines that the company cherishes daily, are permeated. The SDGs are national and governmental goals set by the United Nations; however, we need to think about what each of us can do in businesses and workplaces.

Personal efforts for the SDGs

Table 2 shows the examples of individual efforts. As seen in Table 2, there is a limit to what can be performed at the individual level, and not all goals can be prioritized at the same time. However, it seems that some of them can be done. For goal 1, there is almost nothing you can do at the individual level. As for goal 2, there may be something that farmers can do. Goal 3 may be easier to work with if it's about maintaining the health of yourself and those close to you. If you think of doing the same thing for yourself first, you may naturally understand what you can do for others.

As is the case with Table 2, there is a bias in the content of the efforts at the individual level. Goals such as 1, 9, and 16 will be difficult to work at an individual level^{4),5)}. Due to the efforts toward achieving one goal, there may be some obstacles to achieving other goals. The first action mentioned in Table 2 may conflict with the seventh action. For example, if we refrain from using water, it will be difficult to store water in case of a disaster. In addition, reducing the third goal of food loss contradicts the seventh. The fourth action conflicts with the eighth and ninth. This is far from the content of the direct SDGs, but when considering achieving the goal through personal activities in this way, it is necessary to think carefully before acting. It seems that it can be practiced casually, but also has some aspects that cannot be easily thought of.

It seems that it is not peculiar to Japanese people, but there are various cases where people around me act or are inspired by the media reports and try it for the time being. As mentioned earlier, there are situations where the SDGs are increasingly covered by the media. However, we

are wondering how sustainable we can be at the individual level when the introductions and awareness campaigns decrease.

Status of achievement of SDGs in Japan

We have developed in search of affluence in our lives, but behind the scenes, we encounter various problems such as the destruction of the natural environment, the problems of disparity and discrimination due to poverty, and regional conflicts. The international community spends a lot of time discussing these issues between developed and developing countries. Developed countries are discussing solutions to the problems of various developing countries; however, there were cases where they did not match the characteristics and actual conditions of the region, and there were often voices of opposition from the developing countries. To prevent the world from being divided due to the accumulation of such dissatisfaction, developed and developing countries will now be obliged to work together to achieve their goals, aiming for a sustainable and “no one left behind” society. Considering that the abnormal weather and poverty have affected our lives in recent years, each person must bring change to their consciousness.

In addition, the "Sustainable Development Report 2021" released last year contains scores of achievements for each of the SDGs and country-wise rankings³⁾. Japan ranked 18th among 193 countries. Japan was ranked 15th in 2019 and 17th in 2020, but the ranking is gradually declining. Among the goals, Gender Equality (Goal 5), Climate Action (Goal 13), and Life Below Water (Goal 14) are evaluated as low. It is also necessary to raise the evaluation of other goals (Table 3).

CONCLUSION

At the SDGs Summit held in 2019, the UN Secretary-General stated, “Efforts have progressed, but the achievements are biased and delayed, far from what they should be, and we must now expand and accelerate our efforts.” In addition, he expressed a sense of crisis in the progress of the SDGs, saying, “We need to make the future 10 years of action to achieve the SDGs²⁾.” As evidenced by the rapid global spread of the new coronavirus infection in 2020, the international community is required to unite considering the challenges of cross-border impacts in today's

globalized world. The road to achieving the SDGs is by no means bright. That is why we are now required to think firmly about what each of us can do and take a step forward.

There is a bias in what an individual can do. For this reason, the government must take the initiative in taking comprehensive actions and focus on matters that require revision of the law. Even if you don't want to do it, if you must do it for all humankind, it may be unavoidable to limit it to some extent by law or penalties. In contrast, even if an action guideline is decided, it is an individual citizen who takes that action. If you want to act continuously, you may have no choice but to do it because it is passively decided. You also need to start with something easy for you to do and continue incrementally. It may be necessary to do something that makes us think later that the accumulation of daily actions has resulted in activities for many years. It may be better to think carefully about the content of the action, but it is important to try things that are easy to do without being conscious of continuation. There is a danger that you will not be able to do much if you are aware of what is sustainable from the beginning. Even if you do not understand the details of the SDGs and try to act, it is thought that the underlying content is to eliminate waste and save money and have compassion for others. It may be inevitably possible to achieve the SDGs if we act with such a mentality.

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Table 1 Items and details of SDGs

Goal number	Overview	Detail
1	No Poverty	End all forms of poverty in every place.
2	Zero Hunger	End hunger, achieve food security and nutritional improvements, and promote sustainable agriculture.
3	Good Health and Well-Being	Ensuring healthy lives and promoting welfare for all people of all ages.
4	Quality Education	Providing inclusive, fair and quality education for all and promoting lifelong learning opportunities.
5	Gender Equality	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Ensuring water and sanitation availability and sustainable management for all.
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Ensuring access to affordable, reliable and sustainable modern energy for all.
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as full and productive employment and rewarding human employment for all.
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Build robust infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and promote technological innovation.
10	Reduced Inequalities	Correct inequality within each country and between countries.
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Achieve inclusive, safe, robust and sustainable cities and human settlements.
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Ensuring a sustainable form of production and consumption.
13	Climate Action	Taking urgent measures to mitigate climate change and its consequences.
14	Life Below Water	Conserve and use marine and marine resources in a sustainable manner for sustainable development.
15	Life on Land	Protect and restore terrestrial ecosystems, promote sustainable use, manage sustainable forests, deal with desertification, and prevent and restore land degradation and prevent biodiversity loss.
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Promote a peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development, provide access to the judicial system for all, and build an effective and accountable inclusive system at all levels.

17	Partnership	Strengthen implementation measures for sustainable development and revitalize global partnerships.
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Based on references 1-3).

Table 2 Examples of what you can do as an individual with the contents of the SDGs

Item number	Content	Related SDGs	Detail
1	Try to save water and electricity.	13 and others	Electricity and water consume a lot of energy from the time they are made to the time they are used. At that time, a lot of greenhouse gases are emitted, which causes global warming.
2	Use My Bag (non-disposable shopping bag) and My Bottle (non-disposable drink container).	12, 14	By utilizing My Bag and My Bottle, you can contribute to the reduction of plastic waste. To reduce plastic waste, you should be aware of carrying around your bag or bottle and reducing the use of disposable plastic products such as plastic bags.
3	Reduce food loss.	12	You should try to reduce food loss as much as possible by buying only the amount of food that you can eat. It is calculated that Japanese people are currently losing as much food as throwing away a cup of rice every day. In addition to food loss at home, it is also important to consider that food loss does not occur at the store where you buy the ingredients.
4	Actively reuse and recycle.	13, 14, 15	When the amount of garbage is reduced, the adverse effects on the environment caused by incineration can be reduced. Furthermore, by effectively and repeatedly using resources, we can continue to live without reducing limited resources.
5	Use public transportation as much as possible.	13	Public transportation such as trains and buses can carry many people at once. As a result, greenhouse gas emissions per person are lower than when each person travels by car.
6	Do household chores equally.	5	In Japan, many people still have the idea that husbands should work outside and wives should protect their families, and it is said that Japan is behind the world in terms of gender issues. Compared to wives, the current situation is that husbands spend less time on housework and childcare. When considering gender equality at home, it is ideal for husbands and wives to work together, do household chores, and raise children in the same way.
7	Get ready for a disaster.	11	For example, disaster preparedness includes: arrange the furniture so that it will not fall over even if an earthquake occurs; check the evacuation route on a daily basis so that you will not be in a hurry even if a disaster occurs; decide how to contact your family and friends in an emergency; stockpile drinking water and emergency food.

8	Purchase a product with a certification mark.	14, 15	There is a certification mark given to products and services made in consideration of the global environment and working environment. Active purchase of products with the certification mark can also contribute to the achievement of the SDGs.
9	Buy fair trade products.	1, 8	Fair trade means fair and equitable trade. Nowadays, cheap and good quality products are easily available. However, many of the cheaper products are made in developing countries where labor costs and raw materials are cheaper. The purpose of fair trade is to buy these at a fair price and improve the working environment and livelihoods of producers. Purchasing fair trade products will encourage the independence of developing countries.
10	Use sustainable energy.	7, 13	Japan's main energy source is fossil fuels such as oil, coal and natural gas. However, these resources are not infinite and will eventually run out. Renewable energy is expected as a countermeasure. Renewable energy is energy that does not run out of resources, such as solar power, wind power, and biomass. It also has the characteristic of not emitting (or increasing) greenhouse gases and is said to be effective in preventing global warming.

Based on reference4).



Table 3 SDGs achievement status in Japan as of 2021

Goal number	Achievement status in Japan	Explanation
1	Improving or maintaining achievement	There is still a problem.
2	Moderate improvement	There is an important issue.
3	Improving or maintaining achievement	There is still a problem.
4	Improving or maintaining achievement	Achieved.
5	Moderate improvement	There is a serious problem.
6	Improving or maintaining achievement	There is still a problem.
7	Moderate improvement	There is an important issue.
8	Improving or maintaining achievement	There is still a problem.
9	Improving or maintaining achievement	Achieved.
10	No information	There is an important issue.
11	Improving or maintaining achievement	There is still a problem.
12	No information	There is an important issue.
13	Stagnation	There is a serious problem.
14	Stagnation	There is a serious problem.
15	Recession	There is a serious problem.
16	Improving or maintaining achievement	Achieved.
17	Moderate improvement	There is a serious problem.

Japan is rated as having achieved goals 4, 9, and 16, but otherwise, it is still considered to be in the process.

Based on reference 3).