

Towards the Realization of a Sound Material-Cycle Society

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journalist



JAPAN is now accelerating its work towards achieving a sound material-cycle society. Sakita Yuko is a journalist who has led various NGO activities related to environmental issues and who serves as a member of the Central Environment Council, the Ministry of the Environment, Japan. We spoke to her about Japan's work in this area.

As a member of the Central Environment Council, you were involved in the drafting of the 4th Fundamental Plan for Establishing a Sound Material-Cycle Society (2018 Cabinet Decision). Could you please tell us about the plan's key points and Japan's moves towards implementing a sound material-cycle society?

A key point of the fundamental plan is the establishment of “Regional Circular and Ecological Spheres.” Regional Circular and Ecological Spheres is a concept by which regions can make use of their local resources, such as renewable resources and circulative resources, while taking into account regional characteristics and aiming for sustainable and active regional development. Although as far as possible, resources are circulated within individual regions, when that is difficult they are circulated in a wider area and regions supplement and support each other.

Japan is currently going through a process of great change towards the realization of a sound material-cycle society. For example, from July this year charges were applied to plastic shopping bags across Japan. This is a chance for us citizens to reform our single-use lifestyle and carefully think about recycling and reducing plastic waste. Companies, including large manufacturers and small retailers, are also enthusiastically working on these efforts. One large beverages producer is cooperating with small retailers that put bottle collection boxes outside their stores to make new PET bottles using the bottles collected.

In the energy field too, to date large electric power companies have supplied electricity to every corner of Japan, but in recent years, for example, there are movements leading to regional vitalization by selling electricity created by power generation from biomass such as thinned wood, and waste products.

I feel that now there is a far greater awareness of citizens, local governments, companies and

central government working together towards a sustainable sound material-cycle society.

Could you give some examples of that increased awareness, please?

In one project, the approximately 5,000 gold, silver and bronze medals for the Olympics and Paralympics scheduled for Tokyo next summer will be made with metals recovered from various small used electrical appliances and devices, such as mobile phones. The various usable metals contained in discarded electrical devices are valuable, and because it is possible to collect and reclaim them as a resource, the discarded devices have been described as “urban mines.” The devices have been collected by local governments, companies, schools and others across Japan since April 2017. It took two years for the metals needed for the medals to be successfully acquired. This will be the first time in the history of the Olympics and Paralympics that all the medals are made from recycled metal.

The Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics are also planning to make use of renewable energy such as solar power and hydrogen while implementing the 3Rs (reduce, reuse and recycle). Some examples include reducing food loss and waste; reusing or recycling 99% of goods procured for the games; and recycling 100% of the paper utensils that are used in restaurants in the Athletes’ Village, which for safety reasons are disposable. I expect holding the Olympics and Paralympics in Japan to be an opportunity to spread our efforts towards a sound material-cycle society both inside Japan and abroad. I am also involved in drawing up the sustainability plan of the games.

How do you think Japanese culture and customs can be of benefit when working to realize a sound material-cycle society?

In Japanese there is a word, *mottainai*, that expresses our feeling of regret when we waste gifts

of nature such as food or useful items. From long ago Japan has had a culture of carefully taking care of things. An example of something that typifies that culture, you might say, is the *furoshiki*, a single cloth that can be used to wrap various items.

Also, in order to make recycling widespread, it is important that when individual consumers throw garbage away they first separate it into different resources as carefully as possible. That behavior is well established in Japan and highly praised around the world. I think that this behavior by Japanese people is deeply rooted in an awareness of *mottainai*.

How can Japan contribute to the global realization of sound material-cycle societies?

As Asian countries experience rapid economic development, the amount of waste is increasing and there is a need to quickly establish 3R technology, systems and culture. I believe that Japan can contribute to that in a wide variety of fields, from cutting-edge science and technology, to activities that are rooted in people’s lifestyle, such as separating garbage or composting food waste.

In 2009 the Regional 3R Forum in Asia was set up: a Japanese government initiative to cooperate with UN organizations on promoting 3R in Asia, and involving governments, international organizations, NGOs and others. It has now expanded to become the Regional 3R Forum in Asia and the Pacific and intergovernmental meetings are held almost every year. I am involved in a side event called the Asia 3R Citizen’s Forum. NGOs from various countries present the situation and work being done in their countries and hold workshops to learn from each other’s efforts. Looking forward, I believe it will be ever more important for the citizens of different countries to share their wisdom and experience. 

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
