

New Possibilities for an Aging Society



Akiyama Hiroko, visiting professor at the University of Tokyo's Institute of Gerontology

As Japan is rapidly aging, a growing number of “older people” remain active in the workforce and other sectors of society. We spoke about the possibilities for an aging society with Akiyama Hiroko, a visiting professor at the University of Tokyo's Institute of Gerontology.

In 2018, by Cabinet decision, the Japanese government approved the “Guideline of Measures for Ageing Society.” The Guideline states that “The general trend of determining over 65 as ‘Older

People’ by their age is no longer realistic.” What is the current status of Japan’s aging society?

In 1950, the average life expectancy in Japan was slightly less than 60 years. In 2019, it was approximately 84 years. Moreover, approximately 5% of the population was 65 and over in 1950, while approximately 28% of the population was that age in 2019. As a result, more older people are becoming ill or are in need of nursing care. However, a growing number of people are also maintaining good health and living longer. In 1992 and 2002 the Tokyo Metropolitan Geriatric Medical Center surveyed the normal walking speed of older people, one of the indices used to measure the degree of aging. In that ten-year period, the average normal walking speeds of both men and women increased by the equivalent of 11 years, with the normal walking speed of a 75-year-old person in 2002 being the same as that of a 64-year-old person in 1992.

Compared to the era when life expectancy was about 60, people nowadays can expect to live longer and can make a variety of life plans while they maintain good health. For example, previously, people’s post-retirement lives were short, but now a long second life awaits people after retirement. Accordingly, it is possible for people to embark on second careers completely different from before retirement.

What initiatives are necessary to enhance older people’s second lives in Japan?

A major task for Japan, facing a declining birthrate and an aging population, is to extend the “healthy life expectancy” in which people are able to live in health and continue to live independently. One more major task is to develop an environment in which older people are able to live safely and comfortably with a sense of purpose. To solve these issues, the University of Tokyo’s Institute of Gerontology (IOG) is implementing various projects in collaboration with local governments and private companies. One of these projects is to create jobs for older people in and around the Toyoshikidai Housing Complex in Kashiwa City, Chiba Prefecture where there is an increasing number of aging residents. Many Japanese seniors hope to remain active and play some kind of role in society as long as possible. However, many retired people I interviewed say, “I have nothing to do,” or “I don’t know what to do.” Accordingly, the project includes initiatives supporting the employment of older people in areas such as agriculture and childcare, in cooperation with local farmers and businesses. Working in the areas where they live, within a reasonable extent, can help older people find purpose in life and become engaged in society. This has resulted in the maintenance of good physical and mental health and has contributed to solving local issues such as the labor shortage.

In 2016, the government of Japan also began projects around the nation supporting regions where older people are able to work regardless of age by making use of their knowledge and experience (the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s projects toward a life-long active working environment in cooperation with the region).

Tell us about the possibilities for an aging society that draws on older people’s knowledge and experience.

Japan will have to develop many products and services to meet the needs of older people or solve issues of aging local communities. In other

words, aging societies have the potential for innovation. However, to innovate in ways that meet the diverse needs of older people and local communities, the opinions and ideas of a variety of people are necessary. Accordingly, not only specific companies but local residents, local governments, universities and other organizations need to work together. In 2017, in collaboration with residents, companies and the Kamakura City government, the IOG opened the Kamakura Living Lab in Imaizumidai, a community in the northeast of Kamakura City, Kanagawa Prefecture, with approximately 5,000 residents. Living Lab is a users-centered platform with the goal of creating products, services and social systems that improve daily life. There are more than 400 living labs in Europe. While older people make up approximately half of Imaizumidai’s population, residents are endeavoring to build a community that is livable for young people too. For example, the lab collaborated with a company handling office furniture to create a desk that is well suited to teleworking. Released on the market in 2019, the desk has been praised by purchasers for its easy-to-use features. In fact, Kamakura Living Lab is a joint research program with a living lab in Sweden. When the King and Queen of Sweden visited Japan in 2018, Their Majesties visited Imaizumidai with Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado. I was honored to show our Living Lab to Their Majesties on that occasion.

Initiatives in Japan, which is aging ahead of the rest of the world, have become the focus of international attention. Many people from countries in Asia, Europe and North America have come to inspect the IOG, Toyoshikidai and Imaizumidai. I believe that the innovation generated based on the wealth of knowledge and experience possessed by older people in Japan will contribute greatly to the world. ▮

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
