

Private Sector Drives Japan's SDGs



Professor Norichika Kanie

Photo: Courtesy of Kanie Lab SDGs Platform, Keio University

KEIO University Professor Norichika Kanie is a member of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Promotion Roundtable Meeting, established by the Japanese government under the SDGs Promotion Headquarters to achieve the SDGs. We asked him about Japan's SDGs.

What do you think of Japan's efforts toward achieving the SDGs?

Frankly, the private sector is more active.

I have led a project that considers Japan's contributions to Post-MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) and SDGs since Rio+20 (The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development) in 2012, studying under the theme of creating new value in which research on the environment, development and society is integrated. At first, an atmosphere of teamwork was missing among those involved in environmental and development NGOs, but during the formulation of SDGs a change occurred. Those involved in development began to say that SDGs are important for international development. Companies began to show great interest in how to utilize and handle SDGs during the implementation stage in 2016. In addition, environmental and development NGOs started to become integrated. Then the private sector moved toward the achievement of SDGs.

To put it simply, SDGs are not legally binding. Those who want to achieve the goals work toward them and those who can use the goals will use them to achieve a sustainable society. Since these activities are a response to the concept of SDGs, I feel that SDGs are a good system or device that works very well.

Is the penetration of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) behind the response of companies?

That's right. At the same time, because of the awareness of the importance of contributing to ESG (Environment, Social and Governance)

investments, the field has grown, and corporate culture has moved toward solving global issues. SDGs can be seen as an easily accepted system.

Another factor is this year's Davos Forum. While corporate leaders in Europe and the United States were well aware of SDGs, participants from Japan remain unaware and their frustration at having to catch up has influenced them.

What issues have Japanese companies been working toward more enthusiastically under SDGs?

First, they need to recognize and understand that SDGs are opportunities. They should link these opportunities with their core business, thinking that if they work toward these SDGs, they will profit. They will expand their overseas markets. In Indonesia, where active movements are observed for achieving SDGs, development plans are revised to be in line with SDGs. If they work toward SDGs, they can use the same language, for example, "Our product contributes to the target 5 or 3 of SDGs." Marketing products would become easier. Therefore, SDGs are not a burden, but an expansion of opportunity.

How should political measures and governance be used during the implementation stage of SDGs?

Simply speaking, we have had governance based on targets for climate change and biodiversity, but now we are finding that the Earth will be destroyed if we only accumulate systems agreements based on turning international negotiations into domestic law. SDGs are the first comprehensive method and are likely to significantly change the system of global governance.

They are an approach in which first a goal is set, then people "work as they like" to achieve that goal, regardless of the method. It may sound slightly rude, but if more companies work actively because they can profit, it should lead to a new framework.

Tell us about the SDGs on which you (Professor Kanie) are working at the university.

Before the General Assembly of the United Nations determined SDGs, we had an experiment called "Campus SDGs" to learn about how student awareness could grow. For example, we put the following message written on paper in a restaurant: "Reduce food waste by 50%." We also put a message about water issues in a restroom, one about waste on a garbage bin and one about energy issues on a light switch. Before this experiment, 18% of students were aware of SDGs, but the rate rose to around 80% after three weeks and we received comments such as, "I want to take action" and "This information is not sufficient." The faculty in the university also began to take an interest and now we are expanding our efforts in cooperation with universities in Shiga Prefecture [see pp. 18-19] as well as high schools.

What role should the government take?

The international community created SDGs and the private sector responded first. The government should adjust its vertical administrative structure to think in a more integrated manner, creating a structure for promoting SDGs and a system for incorporating the necessary funding.

At the same time, companies and local governments need to be more active. For example, they should work on standardization in which added value is attached to sustainable products, which can be done without relying on the Japanese government and the high level of interest from the private sector will change the world, which will set a good example.

The SDGs Promotion Headquarters has determined the creation of the "Japan SDGs Award," but we need to create a system not just for rewarding, but also for supporting the actions in the private sector. This is a very important approach. 

Interview by HITOSHI CHIBA
