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The Regional Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals by Japanese Local Governments

KAWAKUBO Shun

Hosei University

2-33 Ichigayatamachi, Shinjuku, Tokyo 162-0843, JAPAN

E-mail: kawakubo@hosei.ac.jp

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Think Globally, Act Locally: Working toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the local level while taking global trends into accounts is key to transforming our world. Many local governments around the world are now starting to incorporate the SDGs into their visions, strategies, policies and measures. The purpose of this study is to identify issues for the regional implementation of the SDGs (development of local SDGs) and to examine specific SDG localization methods in cooperation with forward-looking local governments in Japan.

An interview survey was conducted with several local governmental officers to discover what kind of information is required to support their initiatives. A nationwide questionnaire survey was also conducted to complement the interview survey. The questionnaires were distributed to 47 prefectures and 1,741 municipalities across Japan in 2017, 2018 and 2019; more than 1,200 municipalities responded to the questionnaire in 2019. Awareness of the SDGs among local governments across the country increased from 48% to 99% between 2017 and 2019. The percentage of municipalities working to achieve the SDGs also increased from 8% to 19.5% during this period. These surveys further revealed that the following information and features were required for working toward the SDGs at the local level: 1) Statistical data to elucidate the current situation of their cities and communities, 2) A database on visions, strategies, policies and measures incorporating SDGs, 3) Examples of practices in local SDG initiatives, and 4) A support tool for Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs).

An appropriate set of local SDG indicators was developed to visualize and clarify the actual situation of local governments in Japan. First, all 232 indicators proposed by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division were carefully reviewed from the perspective of applicability at the local governmental level. Then, those indicators were re-reviewed from the perspective of applicability to the national context of Japan. Indicators for applicability at the local level in Japan were then identified. Non-applicable indicators were then slightly modified while retaining their essence so that they could be applied at the local level in Japan. Some original local indicators for certain SDG goals were also added to enable the efforts and progress of Japanese local governments to be monitored even though they are not directly described in the targets of the global SDGs. The study found that only 5% of global SDG indicators proposed by the United Nations Statistics Division could be used without modification at the local level in Japan. There were many indicators that did not suit the actual situation in Japan because they were made with developing countries in mind. There were many indicators that were created with developed countries in mind but could not be used because data were unavailable. Approximately 50% of the global SDG indicators could be used after localization.

Public statistical data for all Japanese prefectures and municipalities were extracted and collected from statistics of every Japanese national ministry and agency and stored in the local SDG database that had been developed. A database of visions, strategies, policies and measures incorporating the SDGs as well as examples of

practices for local SDG initiatives was developed after a survey of all local government websites from Hokkaido in the northernmost part of Japan to Kyushu in the southernmost.

The online "Local SDGs Platform" (https://local-sdgs.jp/?lang=en_us), which enables stakeholders to register, search for, and share their efforts and best practices toward achieving the SDGs, was developed after the local SDG indicators and local SDG databases had been developed. The platform enables assessment of a selected prefecture or municipality by calculating scores varying from 0 points (worst in Japan) to 100 points (best in Japan) based on the indicator values. The platform uses a simple geographic information system (GIS) so that the users can easily select their prefectures and municipalities of interest. The platform also generates radar charts that show the balance among the 17 goals of the SDGs. Users of the platform can also investigate which prefectures and municipalities have visions, strategies, policies and measures that incorporate SDGs as well as examples of practices regarding local SDG initiatives.



Fig. 1 Top page of the Local SDGs Platform.

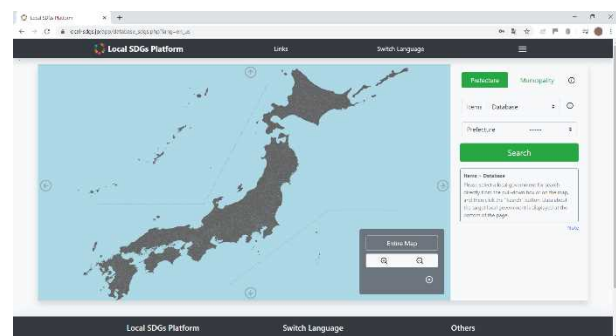


Fig. 2 Interface of the Local SDGs Platform.

Although the platform and local SDG indicators were initially developed for Japan, the framework and its development methodology are universally applicable and relevant in any region or country. Effective utilization of the platform together with local SDG indicators is expected to support connections among stakeholders, understanding of their actual local situations and sharing of information, which will support achievement of the SDGs. Currently, similar studies can be found around the world. These efforts will encourage local stakeholders and foster local SDG initiatives, ultimately contributing to achievement of the SDGs globally. Some challenges remain, however. Even now, 50% of global SDG indicators are found to be difficult to use at the local level, at least in the Japanese context. This percentage would be even higher in places where national public statistical databases are not well established. Previous research has revealed that less than half of the SDG targets are assessable even at the national level where data can be more easily collected than at the local level. A lack of high-resolution data is one of the biggest challenges to be overcome to efficiently work toward achievement of the SDGs. Future research should address these issues.