

New Komeito Approaches to the Problems of Environmental Endocrine Disrupters

Shuichi Kato

Ph.D, Member of the House of Councilors

Chairman of New Komeito's Endocrine Disrupters Project Team

Bureau Chief of the Secretariat in charge of the Eco-Japan Project of the New Komeito

Thank you for introducing me. I am Shuichi Kato, of the New Komeito Party.

Today, on November 26th, many NGOs, experts, and government participants are taking part in first day of the symposium vital to “human security”. I am delighted that this symposium is being held here in Hiroshima. I would like to express my gratitude to all those involved for their efforts, especially to the Ministry of the Environment, Hiroshima Prefecture, City of Hiroshima, and the Japan Society of Endocrine Disrupters Research.

New Komeito was the first to discuss environmental endocrine disrupters in the Diet, and has been quick to take action. We have announced an Emergency Proposal dealing with endocrine disrupters, covering four sectors and 23 items. At the same time, we have also requested active measures and budgetary action of the government through the appropriate committee.

We also announced an Emergency Proposal for dioxin pollution in 1998, and the pledged Law Concerning Special Measures against Dioxins started with an original Komeito proposal. Established in July 1999, it was unanimously adopted, and will be fully implemented from December. As the Ministry of the Environment plans to respond on as large a scale as possible, problems such as stocks and incinerators remain, but effectiveness is increasing.

One aspect of endocrine disrupter solutions which has especially attracted our attention is the precautionary principle. The 15th principle of the 1992 “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development” is preventive measures, and the 1997 G8 Heads of State Conference on the Environment, held in Miami in the United States, took as its theme the environmental standards for children, who are so vulnerable to their environment. This topic was also hotly debated at the recent WWSD in Johannesburg.

For these reasons, New Komeito takes precautionary principles very seriously. Our proposals to date include arguing the necessity for a Chemical Safety Standards Law, and we continue to argue that precautionary principles need to be part of our social structure by bringing up the introduction of environmental standards for children in Diet committee and Diet sessions. We have not stopped at proposals – we have been involved in a wide range of activities such as petition drives, and parliamentary petitions based on the Constitution.

One aspect has been the “Petition for Study, Research, and Solution of Endocrine Disrupters in Kasumigaura” which gathered over 165,000 signatures in Ibaraki prefecture, focusing on Kasumigaura and surrounding areas. The Environment Committee agreed unanimously to adopt it as a parliamentary petition. It was a definite sign of progress on the endocrine disrupters issue.

A petition drive on endocrine disrupters in Niigata also collected over 500,000 signatures, representing one in four residents of that prefecture. These signatures witness the enormous concern and

anxiety mothers feel regarding the environment in which their children grow up. This reflects the strong feelings not only of the mothers, but of grandparents as well toward their grandchildren.

Based on these petitions, we are considering enacting legislation such as a Chemical Safety Standards Law or a Law to Reduce the Risks in Children's Environments. This reflects the current increasing diffusion of chemicals on a global scale, the fact that microscopic amounts which were previously considered insignificant do have effects, the problem of reproductive toxicity, cumulative effects in the body and biological accumulation, and the fact that effects take time to appear and may affect future generations. These factors may make causative relationships unclear, and generate great concern regarding the effects on the fetus, baby, or young child. We even see publications such as "Compound Pollution in Fetuses". This is why it is important to create a social structure for precautionary principles. We have just given a clear indication of our framework planning for these precautionary principles at the recent New Komeito Rally. We should act on our political will in just this kind of "life-concerning issues".

From conversations with many mothers, we were aware of their concerns regarding the effects of endocrine disrupters and other chemicals on fetuses and infants, and the precautionary principles for these problems. We of the current generation have a definite duty to protect our infants and children, the generation of the future. It is truly vital to enact the Komeito-supported Law to Reduce the Risks in Children's Environments.

In a related vein, we would like to work on the issue of toys made from soft polyvinyl chloride, as we did last year. Soft polyvinyl chloride is made soft by adding plasticizers such as phthalate esters and stabilizers such as bisphenol A, that are reproductive or liver toxins. When the New Komeito presented the government with our demands regarding endocrine disrupters, we gave a total of 23 items in 4 fields, including children's toys and nursery items, and we have also covered development of alternatives to listed products. We are also working on responses to related issues such as "sick house syndrome," chemical sensitivities, and allergies. Over 14 million people have signed a New Komeito petition on measures for allergies, and we have now made considerable progress on this issue.

Environmental NPOs are also devoting much energy to regulating these soft PVC toys, and it is worth noting the activities of local governments since last year regarding regulation of toys. The Kawasaki City Council in Kanagawa Prefecture voted unanimously last June to adopt a report on abolishment of PVC for toys. Last July, the Chiba Prefectural Assembly also moved to approve a report. In Japan's capital, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government also decided last November to draw up stricter standards along with guidelines for children to prevent chemicals such as endocrine disrupters from damaging the health of infants and children with an aim to encourage the use of alternative substances.

These are some examples of recent remedies to the problems which chemicals such as endocrine disrupters pose to infants and children. And what about the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare? Despite difficulties, they indicate a willingness to do what they can to address the problem. However, their response is to apply the Food Hygiene Law of 1947, in other words, to treat it as a kind of food issue, on the level of a secondary application of the standards. Unresolved problems of clarity remain. Some of the problematic points are that the plastics plasticizers used in toys are not "additives" of the kind referred to by the Food and Hygiene Law. They are not originally intended to be eaten or drunk. I hardly need to

remind you that soft PVC toys are not something for small children to eat or drink. The result of their response could be lax and underpowered implementation.

18 countries have already regulated the phthalate esters implicated in these toys through legislation, and 5 countries including the US are issuing warnings and advice through government organs.

I believe that the Japanese Government should also make the most of the vital lessons learned through Minamata Disease and similar experiences, and demonstrate a clearly proactive approach to creating environmental standards for infants and children, and regulating the use of soft PVC for toys. The government should also review legislation related to food safety in terms of precautionary principles, and make further studies of nursery items.

In terms of PCB, Law Concerning Special Measures against PCBs, the task of neutralizing and disposal of PCBs is underway. The storage and disposal of agricultural chemicals, and the identification of soil residue locations will impose a burden of effort and duty, however, we urgently needs to act on this, since Japan has in the past disposed of DDT and defoliants by burying them. The sale of organochlorine agricultural pesticides was prohibited about in 1970. According to Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries studies, 3,680 tonnes of organochlorine agricultural pesticides remain buried in 174 locations in 31 prefectures as far as proven by the research. Some agricultural pesticides are suspected of endocrine disrupter effects, making adequate monitoring and safe disposal efforts a necessity. New Komeito has a particularly strong interest in working on solutions.

New Komeito is resolved to work actively on enacting legislation on Chemicals Safety Standards and the law for reducing the risks in children's environments, and also on international regulation of endocrine disrupters, and towards the realization of environmental guidelines to act as international standards related to export credit for the Japan Bank for International Cooperation and other sources.

I would like to close by expressing my commitment to work actively on having the Earth Charter promoted by Gorbachev and others as a touchstone to guide the United Nations and global society on the direction humanity should take. This issue was also discussed at the Johannesburg WWSD.