

News

JPPF Study Meeting: *Challenges of International Health Cooperation That COVID-19 Laid Bare*

The second wave of COVID-19 is under way in the northern hemisphere with the arrival of autumn, and curfews have been imposed again in Europe, according to media reports. JPPF organized the second study meeting on 20 October, following on the first study meeting that focused on the coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of “Human Security”.



The latest study meeting sought to understand the pandemic from the perspective of international politics and to explore Japan’s roles in international health cooperation. JPPF Chair Hon. Yoko Kamikawa introduced Dr. Kayo Takuma of Tokyo Metropolitan University, an expert on international politics in the field of international cooperation in health, who had been invited to speak on the incalculable effect of the pandemic. After the introduction, Dr. Takuma gave a lecture titled, “Challenges of International Health Cooperation That COVID-19 Laid Bare”. In the Q&A session that followed, a broad set of questions was fielded from participating parliamentarians, totaling about 20, for a substantive exchange of opinions.

[Summary of Lecture by Dr. Kayo Takuma]



Whereas infection control in the early 20th century was confined to the field of public health, today’s coronavirus pandemic has broad implications not only on health but also on the global economy and growing uncertainty brought about by poverty, leaving greater room, for good or ill, for politicization of the pandemic. The U.S.-China cooperation against SARS, WHO-U.S. cooperation against H1N1 influenza, and U.S. leadership against AIDS and Ebola are some examples of good practices in international cooperation in the field of health, particularly infection control.

Today, however, the Trump administration, against the backdrop of U.S.-China tensions, has criticized WHO for being China-centric and not fulfilling its basic responsibilities, and has formally notified withdrawal from WHO. As the history of the U.S. initiative in founding WHO and its leadership in global health shows, the loss from the U.S. withdrawal will be felt not only in funding (U.S. contributions accounted for 12% of WHO’s budget), but also in a wide range of other areas, including human talent, medicines and the U.S.’s standing in the world, and for this reason, there have been criticisms from inside the U.S.

China is increasing its presence in this field as well. Dr. Margaret Chan, from Hong Kong, was appointed Director-General of WHO in 2006, and China has steadily been promoting global health as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. The realities, however, are that even though China is promoting its vaccine and mask diplomacy, it is not near replacing the U.S. either in terms of funding or ability to supply drugs, as evidenced by lack of trust in the quality of China’s vaccines and masks.

As for assessment of WHO’s response, Germany and France have pointed out a lack of “evidence-based recommendations” and have suggested other reforms of WHO. Specifically, these include strengthening WHO’s authority in initial response, which is significantly important in implementation of response, and setting more detailed categories for situation assessment.

At a time when U.S. leadership may not be forthcoming, Japan’s roles should include more actively promoting involvement in the COVAX and other frameworks for fair distribution of vaccines around the world, strengthening cooperation with the U.S. and China as Japan has good relations with both countries, and focusing on cooperation with Asian countries through such initiatives as ASEAN Center for Infectious Diseases.



© Q&A Session

[Hon. Keizo Takemi]

What fraction of the U.S.’s ODA is distributed in the health sector? At recent special sessions of the WHO Executive Board, the U.S. was active in submitting its proposals for WHO reform. On the other hand, despite Japan’s proposal at the G7 Ise-

Shima Summit to include establishment of an emergency management system as part of the UHC program, there was neither mention of Japan's such past proposals nor any statement made by Japan. While new proposals have come from Europe and the U.S., it appears that Japan's presence has rapidly decreased with the COVID-19 pandemic. How do you assess this situation? Since the appointment of the current Director-General, there has been a concern, about lack of transparency and accountability in WHO's governance. Has the Executive Board's oversight weakened?

[Hon. Ryuhei Kawada]

What is the relation between WHO and countries regarding funding as well as vaccines and drugs?



[Hon. Yoshinori Suematsu]

What is the U.S. presidential candidate Joe Biden's stance on WHO? What advantages will countries have by making their vaccine strains available to other countries?



[Dr. Kayo Takuma]

While the fraction of the U.S.'s ODA in the health sector has declined, it is still the world's largest contributor to WHO. One of the challenges for Japan will be to communicate its past contribution to the world. We also cannot completely rule out the influence that the U.S. and China, both members of the Executive Board, have on WHO's transparency. China, moreover, pledged a one-off contribution of \$2 billion in May and may engage in other forms of cooperation.

If Mr. Biden is elected president, the U.S. may quickly rejoin WHO to maintain its influence in the organization and for the technical benefits that can be had from WHO. As for the benefit of providing vaccine strains, it would probably be more beneficial for a country to monopolize the strains, although this will draw international criticisms, than to provide them to international organizations.

[Hon. Shintaro Ito]

What options does WHO have in terms of vaccines? Will Dr. Tedros's successor be someone tied to China? What stance should Japan take in consideration of its national interest?

[Hon. Teruhiko Mashiko]

Will WHO continue to exist? Or is there a possibility to establish a new organization?

[Hon. Hitoshi Kikawada]

There has been erosion of trust in WHO from its foundering in its initial response to COVID-19 as well as concerns about its ties with China. How should we respond to the calls for WHO reform?



[Dr. Kayo Takuma]

Even though there are concerns about its withdrawal, the U.S. will still supply its vaccines to the COVAX. After Dr. Tedros's term ends in 2022, the U.S. and China may put up their own candidates for a successor and engage in fierce campaigning. Japan will need to take action by considering various possibilities. Establishment of an international institution requires strong leadership, and it would be difficult, under the current circumstances, to establish a new organization.

The U.S. led the creation of WHO. During the Cold War era, WHO was successful in balancing conflicting interests of the U.S. and the Soviet Union to enable concerted action toward eradication of smallpox. In that sense, even though the U.S. and China have conflicting interests, WHO must face up to the criticism that it could not bring its power of coordination to bear. WHO should learn from adroitness of past directors-generals in matters of international relations and work toward regaining trust.

[Closing Address by Chair Hon. Yoko Kamikawa]

I would like to thank Dr. Takuma for showing us how Japan's persistent effort in international cooperation is in dire straits amid the politicization of the coronavirus pandemic and shifting power balance. We hope to give due consideration to future parliamentary diplomacy and take robust actions as JPPF.

Established in 1974, JFPF is the world's first supra-partisan parliamentary group on population and development.

In an age when global solidarity is needed to address various challenges, JFPF is expected to play an increasingly important role as a parliamentarian caucus with a long history and tradition of leading Japan's diplomacy in the international community.

In the future issues of JFPF Newsletter, we will carry "JFPF Column" on activities and initiatives related to population and development undertaken by JFPF members

JFPF Column:

- Hon. Yukio Ubukata, Member of the House of Representatives
- Hon. Tatsuo Fukuda, Member of the House of Representatives
- Hon. Ryuhei Kawada, Member of the House of Councillors

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[Editorial responsibility: JFPF secretariat]

JFPF Column



Hon. Yukio Ubukata

Member of the House of Representatives

"The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated". These are the words of Mahatma Gandhi. It means that if you want to know how a country is treating its people, you only need to look at how that country is treating its animals. Considered in this light, I think Japan still has a long way to go in its treatment of its animals and its people.

An amendment to the Animal Welfare and Management Act was enacted last year and put into effect this year. A project team, established within the supra-partisan Parliamentary Group against the Culling of Dogs and Cats, made preparations for this private members' bill. I also answered questions in the Diet as an author of the bill.

The amendment introduced more severe penalties against animal abuse and eliminated the use of gas chambers for euthanasia, in principle. We are also working on increasing animal-welfare-related budget so that gas chambers can be converted into rehoming centers.

This year, we launched a supra-partisan parliamentary group to work toward the welfare of animals in general. There is no basic act on animal welfare in Japan. We hope to regularly organize study meetings and have a private members' bill passed, which may take two to three years.

Persistent efforts are also needed to address population issues. I have been on JFPF study tours of Cambodia and other countries where I saw firsthand what it is like to live in slums. I also saw the efforts and challenges of ODA projects for health and poverty reduction, leaving me with a strong impression that "seeing is believing". From this experience, I felt strongly that education is at the crux of solving the issues of poverty, population and development.

The right to education is a basic human right. Failure to ensure this right will have an adverse effect on those most vulnerable in society. In accepting people from overseas, Japan has only taken stopgap measures without fully guaranteeing their rights. Competition for talents is expected to intensify globally. I think it is very important for Japan's future that we have discussions on how we should develop policies for accepting people from overseas and properly enact a migration law that guarantees their right to education and other fundamental rights.

Website: <http://www.ubu2.jp/>



Hon. Tatsuo Fukuda

Member of the House of Representatives

We are facing a crisis. Japan, however, is a country that can turn a crisis into an opportunity for change. The period at the end of Edo and post-war Japan attest to this. Just as in the past, courage in accommodating change and resilience will be essential in this coronavirus pandemic.

From the perspective of "population and security", Japan faces the issues of declining fertility and financial difficulties, as well as the fact that it is caught in the crossfire of U.S.-China tensions. This difficult juncture may be an opportunity to create a new set of values.

If we turn our attention to the world, the population is rapidly growing and food will be in short supply. A zero-sum world is a world of self-destruction. A half-century has already passed since Takeo Fukuda, my grandfather, warned, "Japan faces a population decline, the world a population explosion". I would suggest establishing a new framework for creating

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Back numbers are available from this link 

<https://www.apda.jp/en/topics.html>

a “world of mutual support and cooperation” and turning our attention to people most vulnerable. I think that herein lies the role of Japan.

In 1983, it was decided at the InterAction Summit, also known as the OB Summit, which was founded at the suggestion of Takeo Fukuda, that “peace and security”, “world economic revitalization”, and “problems of population, environment and development” would be its priority themes. The importance of these closely interrelated issues is even greater today in

building a “world of mutual support and cooperation”.

Together with my colleagues with expertise in politics and in other fields, I am exploring how we can survive the post-COVID-19 world from a “broad, long-term perspective of society and economy in general”. I think it will be important to create new values adapted to the new age, including for the issues of population, and formalize it in concrete policies.

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Hon. Ryuhei Kawada

Member of the House of Councillors

Prefecture, we have succeeded in switching to organic rice in all school lunches. In a politician-led initiative, we provided support in increasing the number of organic farmers. We are also promoting this initiative on a larger scale in Kisarazu City, and if successful, it has the potential to expand even further.

It has become apparent in recent years that in addition to food, “social connections” have a major role in our health. For example, it is more beneficial health-wise to spend time chatting with others than to exercise in total solitude.

The value of community-based solidarity and sustainability of small-scale family farming—both long-standing features in Japan—are being revisited globally in the context of creating sustainable societies. I think that the coronavirus pandemic affords us with an opportunity to rediscover such distinct qualities of Japan.

At the Diet, I was appointed the youngest Chair of the House of Councillors’ Committee on Oversight of Administration. In that role, I took concrete actions to reinforce the committee’s oversight functions, convening a subcommittee, for the first time in decades, and compiling its report. Next year, I will further advance this work as the committee’s lead director to promote policies that protect people’s lives.

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COVID-19 has clearly highlighted the importance of health care as an infrastructure and the value of public health care services. In particular, the crisis posed questions regarding whether our health care system, including health centers, is functioning properly, including during normalcy, whether hospitals are sufficiently equipped, and whether hospitals in rural areas have maintained their preparedness to accept patients.

It also made us realize that enhancing global health, as opposed to limiting our focus on our national needs, is in our own best interest in dealing with an infectious disease. Medicines and vaccines are obviously important, but it is only when our immune system is effectively working that we can resist infection.

I have emphasized now and again that such basic things like water, nutrition and hygiene are extremely important for our immune system and health.

On matters of food and nutrition, I work for promoting use of organic food in school lunches as well as local production for local consumption. In Isumi City, Chiba



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