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Institute for the Advanced Study
of Sustainability

SDG–UP Symposium Launches Platform to Mobilise Japanese Universities for the SDGs.

Established by United Nations University (UNU) to enhance cooperation between Japanese Universities for the SDGs, the UNU SDG–University Platform (SDG-UP) will increase members' presence in international academic communities and contribute towards achieving the SDGs both locally and internationally.

On 28 August 2020, UNU-IAS organised an online symposium to launch the UNU SDG–University Platform (SDG-UP), with the support of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan. Panelists included leading experts from the private sector, local government and academia that led discussions on strengthening collaboration between Universities in Japan and international organisations. Approximately 530 people joined the event, organised in cooperation with Toyo Keizai Inc. and Wave LTD group.

In the opening remarks, David Malone (Rector, UNU), welcomed the establishment of such a platform to generate discussion around the SDGs. He emphasised that while the MDGs had applied to developing countries, the 2030 Agenda was universal, with the SDGs calling for action by all nations. He urged participants to think about how the SDGs applied to individual citizens and how we could all contribute to achieving the targets under each goal.

As part of the opening remarks, Naoki Himiya (Director, International Affairs Division, Minister's Secretariat, MEXT) noted that the global expansion of the new coronavirus infection (COVID-19) causing anxiety and uncertainty in society has increased the importance of building sustainable society. He stressed that this platform would offer opportunities for active discussions on the SDGs with its partners as well as to disseminate information to the world by mobilising international networks of UNU.

In the keynote speech, entitled "Significance of the SDG University Platform," Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi (Director, UNU-IAS) explained the background and role of the platform. She stated that Japan's presence in the field of higher education around the world is relatively low, although younger generations are aware of the SDGs and universities and other institutions are conducting unique researches on the SDGs in Japan.

She also reported that at a side event of the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) held in July 2020, there was a discussion that the higher education community collaborating with various stakeholders has to make efforts to find solutions to global issues for future build back better. Based on this situation, she stressed that the realisation of a more resilient society through changing individual behaviour of Japanese university officials would be brought about by strengthening the efforts for SDGs at each university, developing human resources, and disseminating relevant information. She emphasised that the key is the localisation of SDGs and the synergy effect of each goal. She highlighted that SDG–UP was designed to respect the diversity of participating Universities, discuss common challenges, and promote the SDGs in an integrated manner. She also confirmed that the platform would be used for disseminating achievements by mobilising the global network of UNU.

Takatsugu Kitajima (Secretariat Head, SDG–UP) introduced the “Times Higher Education Impact Rankings”, a ranking index that has been evaluating SDGs related activities conducted by Universities on a global level since 2019, with many Japanese universities participating and conducting individual analyses. He stated that SDG–UP planned to analyse this index and present their own opinions regarding evaluation criteria in the future.

In the panel discussion, leading experts from the private sector, local government and academia highlighted the role of universities in moving societies forward in a sustainable manner. The panelists introduced the efforts of each institution for SDGs as well as cutting-edge research, educational curriculum development, and idea exchange on possibilities of changing behavior through collaboration.

Makoto Gonokami (President of the University of Tokyo) emphasised that the foundation of socio-economics to realise a better future is human behavior and explained the background and significance for establishing the Global Commons Center as a case of promoting SDGs. He stressed that universities would play a more important role to be knowledge hubs in a course of changing individual behaviour. He also touched upon the issuance of corporate finance-type university bonds as an unprecedented attempt from October 2020 in order to build a fund circulation that enables investment for a sustainable future.

Miki Sugimura (Vice President for Global Academic Affairs, Sophia University) introduced research and educational programs related to various SDGs goals that are actively promoted in cooperation with international institutions. She mentioned impressive cases where students provided various opportunities to researchers by mobilising their networks with universities as well as international organisations that have been built over many years.

Takashi Matsuo (President of the University of Kitakyushu) explained the cases of conducting research on SDGs and regional activities in collaboration with local governments and local companies, utilising public university’s strengths. Community activities in various fields in which students participate independently are highly distinguished.

Naoki Himiya (MEXT) who also gave the opening remarks, outlined the basic policy of Japan's approach to the SDGs, particularly in terms of how the SDGs are positioned in the field of education. He also stated that a society contributing more to the SDGs will be formed by increasing human resources who have potential to become creators of a sustainable society in higher education.

Aya Ito (Partner, Sustainability Promotion Group Recruit Holdings Co., Ltd.) introduced a case of how to incorporate SDGs into business. Regarding business-academia collaboration, she emphasised the key to success that both parties should work responsibly toward a common goal.

Daisaku Kadokawa (Mayor, Kyoto City) introduced SDGs initiatives that take advantage of Kyoto's culture from the standpoint of leading the academic city with more than 30 universities. He drew attention to the importance of close collaboration with educational institutions, focusing on SDGs promotion cases unique to Kyoto, such as a consortium established to strengthen partnerships with universities.

Taikan Oki (Senior Vice-Rector, UNU and Project Manager, SDG Corporate Strategy Forum) explained the "SDG Corporate Strategy Forum" launched in 2017 as a case of collaboration between business institutions and UN agencies. This forum, based on a partnership between UNU and approximately 20 leading companies in Japan, aims to realise a sustainable society through the integration of SDGs into the management and strategic sections of companies, as well as, to

contribute to long-term and sustainable growth. As members of the forum have broadened their understanding of the SDGs, companies have become actively involved in promoting the SDGs. He stressed that he will explore ideal approaches for business institution that can contribute to build a sustainable society and simultaneously be a business from a long-term perspective.

Following the presentations above, discussions were held to delve into the challenges and best practices. Takashi Matsuo (President of the University of Kitakyushu) and Daisaku Kadokawa (Mayor, Kyoto City) pointed out importance of proceeding with projects in line with long-term and multidimensional plans as a factor for successful collaboration between universities and local communities. In the panel, discussions covered significance of various organizations working together to achieve synergy effects in order to prepare for potential risks such as infectious diseases in an era when movement is on a global scale. It was confirmed that universities will play various roles in aiming for a more sustainable society.

Following this, the floor was opened for questions and comments from participants. Questions were raised about how to secure financial resources and to assemble an organisation when implementing SDGs-related projects in the private sector, for example. Aya Ito suggested that budgets would not exclusively be for SDGs, but would be integrated as part of an existing business project related to the SDGs. In the case of the company that she is a part of, there is a department within the organisation that sets guidelines for promoting the SDGs, and business continues as usual while updates on achieving the goals is done on a regular basis.

Taikan Oki (Senior Vice-Rector, UNU and Project Manager, SDG Corporate Strategy Forum) noted that companies are more likely to fulfill their corporate social responsibilities, not as a charity but through business. He continued that it is important to create a system to contribute to realising a more resilient society and emphasised that the realisation would turn costs into investments. This applies not only to companies but also to universities. He stressed that a case of this attempt was corporate finance-type university bonds issued by the University of Tokyo.

In terms of implementing cross-disciplinary efforts at a University level, Vice-President Sugimura, Sophia University, stressed that it is important to construct knowledge and develop human resources who will play a leading role in a sustainable world. Furthermore, in light of the need for inclusive efforts to resolve issues related to the SDGs and the need to promote projects across specialised fields, she introduced a unique attempt that not only faculty members in different specialised fields, but also university staff jointly promote business.

There was keen interest from participants about about the "Times Higher Education University Impact Ranking". As social situations differ across Japan, the evaluation criteria needs to include a standard that can appropriately reflect such differences.

Opinions and questions that could not be asked during the symposium, will be addressed by the SDG-UP team moving forward.

Finally, Shinobu Yume Yamaguchi (Director, UNU-IAS) emphasised that this platform will strengthen collaborations between various stakeholders and universities, and participating universities will work hard through active exchange of opinions. She concluded the symposium with a hope that SDG-UP will be a place of contributing to the realisation of a sustainable society.