

Can Japan Reach a Consensus Regarding Policies to Address Its Low Birthrate?

- Building Platforms for Participatory Democracy-

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“Deliberative Democracy” was discussed as Theme 1 at NIRA Forum 2023, held by the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) on February 4, 2023. Deliberative discussion among citizens will be indispensable to reaching a consensus regarding policies to address Japan’s declining birthrate, a topic regarding which there is a significant intergenerational gap in thinking. But how can we establish mechanisms for policymaking by means of deliberative discussion?

One method would be to adopt new perspectives when setting agendas. For example, in the area of support for child-raising, it is important to set the agenda in a direct relation to population decline; this means changing the agenda from the traditional approach that focuses on the current generation to one that takes future generations into consideration. The media is an exemplar of an institution with the power to set agendas, and it will also be essential to ensure that human resources in this area are fully capable of the task.

Another method is the rebuilding of platforms for deliberative discussion, an area in which IT is also expected to contribute. In Kakogawa City (Hyogo Prefecture), we can point to a practical example of deliberative discussion using an Internet platform. Although there are certain aspects of the process that give rise to difficulty in such deliberative discussions when the matter under debate is a policy issue at the national level, it is also possible that deliberative discussions led by regional administrations could spur discussions at the national level.

At the same time, there are concerns that the current Japanese system of governance in itself, characterized as it is by an almost complete lack of change in the ruling party and the limited ability of the administration to bring up-to-the-minute information from the ground level into dialogue with the political system, is hindering deliberative discussion-led policymaking.

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Participants in NIRA Forum 2023 “Theme 1: Deliberative Democracy”

- Sakie Akiyama
Founder, Saki Corporation
- Daisuke Furuta
Journalist / CEO, media-collab Inc.
- Mariko Mikami
Journalist
- Naoto Nonaka
Professor, Gakushuin University
- Hirokazu Okumura
Managing Director, Open Governance Network
- Sachiyo Onishi
Professor, Ritsumeikan University
- Yoichi Serikawa
NIRA Research Evaluation Council / Editorial Fellow, Nikkei Inc.
- Hiroko Shimada-Logie
Professor, Kyoto University
- Masahiro Sogabe
Professor, Kyoto University
- Isao Tada
Then Director, Smart City Promotion and Support, Policy Planning Division, Planning Department, Kakogawa City Council
- Kensuke Takayasu
Professor, Seikei University
- Tetsuki Tamura
Professor, Nagoya University
- Masaki Taniguchi
President, NIRA / Professor, The University of Tokyo
- Kensuke Ueda
Professor, Sophia University
- Shiro Yamasaki
Special Advisor to the Cabinet in charge of Social Security and Population Policy

(Positions as of date of Forum / Titles omitted / Alphabetical order)

Recent years have seen a growing demand for political participation by the public worldwide. Looking towards the formation of balanced public opinion regarding a variety of social issues, it is to be hoped that there will be an exchange of opinions among the public. At NIRA Forum 2023 “Theme 1: Deliberative Democracy,” we discussed the creation of mechanisms to link the results of deliberative discussion among citizens to Japan’s formal parliamentary decision-making process and reflect them in policies. The discussion at the Forum also considered the nature of a new democratic politics (Note 1).

Agenda-Setting From a New Perspective / Rebuilding of Platforms for Deliberative Discussion

The purpose of social security policy is to provide collective support for risks in the lives of individuals. The biggest question here is whether or not the people who provide the funds actually consent to do so. However, there does not appear to be a consensus or a feeling of solidarity in bearing the financial burden in this area. There is a significant generational gap in thinking, in particular with regard to policies related to child-raising and the nation’s low birthrate. Deliberative discussion among citizens will be essential to reaching a consensus. We must consider how to establish a policy-making mechanism that incorporates such deliberative discussion.

Shiro Yamasaki, Special Advisor to the Cabinet in charge of Social Security and Population Policy, who has been involved in formulating social security policies such as the long-term care insurance system and childcare support, raised the issue based on his own experience, discussing two examples of social security policy related to long-term care and child-raising.

The development of the long-term care insurance system can be called a “success story,” in which a national consensus was reached through a multifaceted process of policy deliberation among various stakeholders in various places. The problem of an aging society that lies in the background of long-term care insurance is an “upstream” intergenerational issue for which it is easy to set an agenda, because everyone can expect to experience related issues in the future when they grow old (Note 2). Given this, people were more prone to feel a sense of involvement, and feelings of empathy, responsibility, and mission were fostered during the process of policy formation.

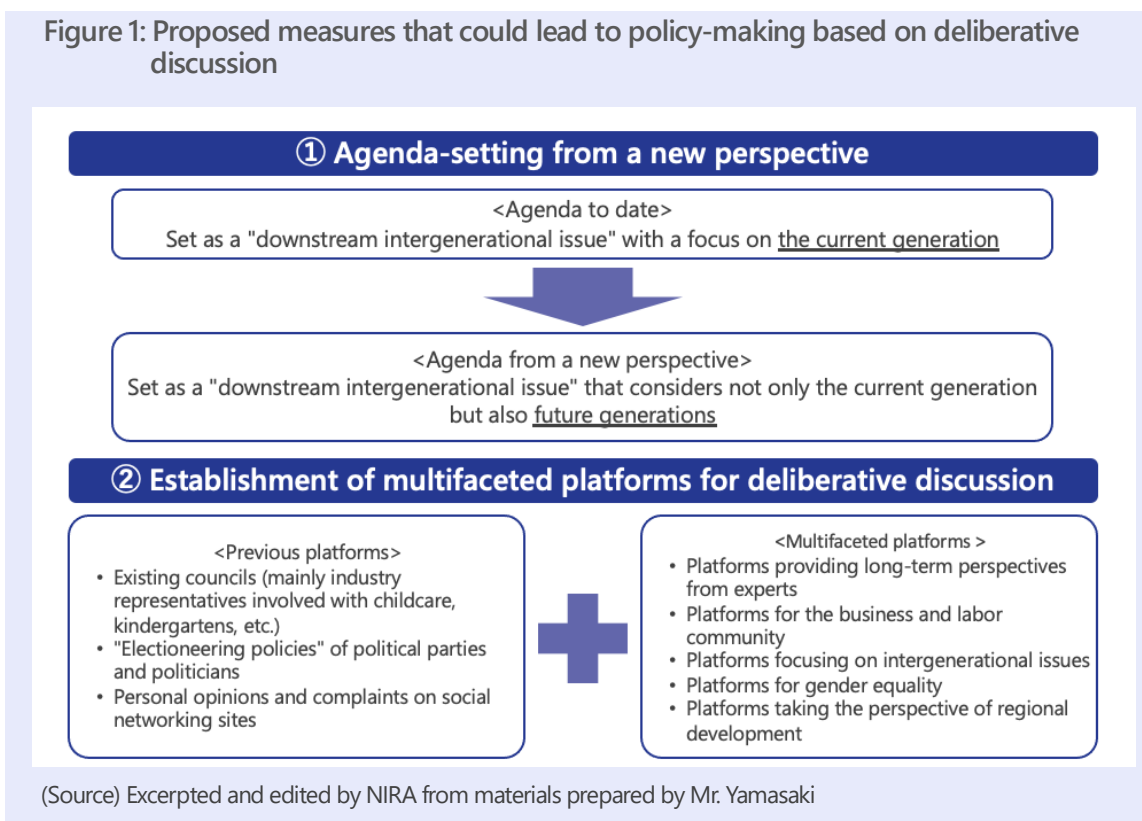
On the other hand, support for child-raising is a “downstream” intergenerational issue, and it is not uncommon for men and companies to be apathetic in this area. For generations that have completed child-rearing, it is difficult to foster the above-mentioned sense of empathy,

responsibility, and mission due to the differences in the historical backgrounds in which they raised their children. For this reason, public sentiment was lukewarm, deliberative discussions did not take place, and thinking among the public was not successfully brought together. Although the declining birthrate is directly linked to Japan’s shrinking population and is a serious problem that affects the very foundations of the nation, there is no consensus among the public regarding countermeasures, and the situation represents a dilemma that is not showing any signs of improvement.

Based on these examples, Mr. Yamasaki proposed the following:

What is now required of the policy-making system is to approach agenda-setting from a new perspective and to rebuild platforms for deliberative discussion, and we must consider how to do this.

Regarding agenda-setting, in the area of support for child-raising, we must be proactive in setting issues directly related to population decline. For example, in setting the agenda regarding the decline of the working and consumer population and the sustainability of social security, it will be important to change the agenda from the traditional approach that focuses on the current generation to one that takes future generations into consideration (Figure 1).



Platforms for deliberative discussion should be rebuilt by moving away from existing platforms such as councils and commissions where industry representatives gather, political parties' and politicians' election-focused policies, and social networking sites which are forums for individual opinions. We should establish multiple platforms encompassing long-term perspectives from intellectuals, discussions between business and labor representatives, intergenerational discussions, gender equality, and regional development.

Towards a Shared Understanding of, and a Sense of Involvement with, Social Issues

In response to Mr. Yamasaki's presentation, Sakie Akiyama, Founder of Saki Corporation, pointed out the importance of the process of sharing awareness of issues among the parties involved.

With regard to deliberative discussion, from the perspective of management also, it is a positive factor to see that people participate in discussions and that decisions are made based on their participation. However, the process of deliberative discussion must also be time-efficient, and a clear agenda and facilitators are essential. In addition, those involved must have a shared understanding of the various issues that form the basis of the discussion.

Participants in the forum expressed a variety of opinions regarding this shared understanding among those involved in discussions. Yuichi Okumura, Managing Director of the Open Governance Network, interpreted the common denominator of Mr. Yamasaki and Ms. Akiyama's comments as the issue of how to foster a sense of involvement. Mr. Okumura pointed out that in addition to participation in the policy formation process, fostering a sense of participation in a community rather than being merely an onlooker by giving people a role, even if small, in the implementation of policy services will also be important for the constructive improvement and review of policies, and for their long-term success.

Journalist Mariko Mikami introduced a case in which the younger generation appealed to the older generation regarding a current situation as an example of how to stimulate a sense of involvement. She related the case of one company in which employees in their 20s persuaded executives to agree with their position by stressing that if certain changes were not approved, it would not be possible to fund company pensions, spurring a sense of urgency in the older employees. She further explained the importance of the use of data to make issues visible in fostering a shared understanding.

Based on his experience as a moderator of the NIRA survey of consideration and deliberation, Daisuke Furuta, journalist and CEO of media-collab.inc, pointed out that it is natural that there are intergenerational differences in awareness among the parties involved regarding various issues, and that it will be important to realize a shared understanding through the use of objective statistical data.

Fostering of Media, Organizations, and Personnel Essential to Agenda-Setting

When encouraging the public to think about social issues, it is desirable to set and present an appropriate agenda. The media is an ideal actor with the ability to set such agendas. During the Forum, expectations for and concerns about the media were discussed.

Ms. Akiyama noted that while it is important to maintain a concept of diversity in order to foster a shared understanding of the issue of Japan's declining birthrate, the recent diversification of media, encompassing social media, has created a situation in which people only focus on their own interests, which could be an impediment to fostering a shared understanding. While acknowledging the potential influence of media agenda-setting, Mr. Furuta also indicated that while numerous media employees overseas are raising children while holding important positions such as editor-in-chief, this is currently rare in Japan, and this calls into question the ability of the Japanese media to set the agenda in this area.

The fostering of human resources in the media, local governments, and NPOs, the actors who are expected to have a significant influence, will be essential to agenda-setting in deliberative discussions. Mr. Furuta suggested that the key will be to promote and give decision-making authority to relatively young people who are active in a variety of fields.

The Use of a Participatory Democracy Platform by Kakogawa City, Hyogo Prefecture, and Future Hopes

IT is also expected to contribute to the rebuilding of platforms for deliberative discussion. A unique practical example of an initiative at the local level demonstrating the formation of a consensus of opinion through deliberative discussion using an online platform was raised.

Kakogawa City in Hyogo Prefecture has introduced a participatory democracy platform known as "Decidim" and is using it in the policy formation process. Isao Tada, at the time Director of Smart City Promotion and Support in the Policy Planning Division of Kakogawa City Council's

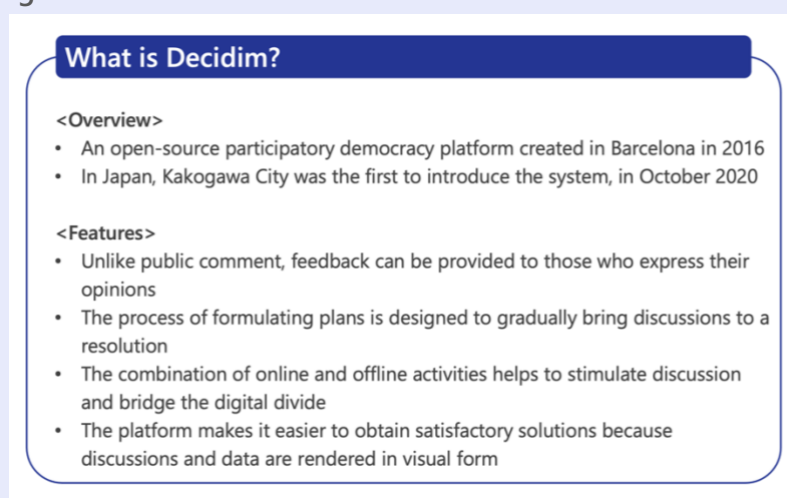
Planning Department, told us that Decidim allows people to share their opinions online on a range of topics concerning the municipality. For example, Kakogawa City has installed CCTV cameras throughout the city with the agreement of its citizens, with the aim of reducing the amount of crime and creating a safe and secure community. The city is now considering the installation of more sophisticated CCTV cameras that employ AI, and is calling for opinions on this subject via Decidim. This process differs from individuals simply expressing their opinions as public comments, in that it also allows feedback on those opinions. In addition, Kakogawa City is working to integrate online discussions centered on Decidim with face-to-face offline discussions in an interconnected effort to bring policies to fruition.

Initiatives such as Decidim that integrate the use of Internet platforms and face-to-face events for deliberative discussions can be expected to have a range of effects.

Professor Tetsuki Tamura of Nagoya University expressed his hope that such online platforms would be an effective way to engage younger people, who are less likely to actively involve themselves in policy formation. In addition, he emphasized that people have different ways of thinking, and agreeing to one opinion may require “letting go” of one's own opinion. With this in mind, he indicated that we can have high hopes for a platform such as Decidim, which allows for mutual feedback, to help participants refine their own ideas through deliberative discussion.

In addition, Professor Tamura, in a comment also related to Mr. Yamasaki's concept of platforms for multifaceted deliberative discussion, stated that the initiative to integrate online discussions with face-to-face offline discussions can be evaluated highly from the perspective that deliberative discussions would be able to be held in a variety of places.

Figure 2: About Decidim



What is Decidim?

<Overview>

- An open-source participatory democracy platform created in Barcelona in 2016
- In Japan, Kakogawa City was the first to introduce the system, in October 2020

<Features>

- Unlike public comment, feedback can be provided to those who express their opinions
- The process of formulating plans is designed to gradually bring discussions to a resolution
- The combination of online and offline activities helps to stimulate discussion and bridge the digital divide
- The platform makes it easier to obtain satisfactory solutions because discussions and data are rendered in visual form

(Source) Excerpted from materials prepared by Mr. Tada and edited by NIRA

Realizing Improved Platforms for Participatory Democracy

While there are high expectations for deliberative discussion using Internet platforms, there are also concerns.

Yoichi Serikawa, a member of the NIRA Research Evaluation Council and (at the time) a Nikkei Inc. Editorial Fellow, pointed out that platform-based deliberative discussions are easy to hold at the local level, but may be difficult in the case of policy issues at the national level, such as social security systems. Furthermore, the topics currently discussed on platforms such as Decidim are issues that are familiar to participants at the local level, and the hurdles for citizen participation are therefore low. Professor Masahiro Sogabe of Kyoto University also raised the issue of how to approach contentious issues on which opinions tend to diverge.

Professor Naoto Nonaka of Gakushuin University pointed out that it is necessary to consider the process of deliberative discussion itself: what type of process is most desirable in order to reach a decision through deliberative discussion on highly abstract topics such as institutional systems, or public goods with complex structures involving various stakeholders, rather than simply approving or rejecting policies regarding issues that are familiar to people, as was the case in Kakogawa City?

On the other hand, Professor Kensuke Ueda of Sophia University indicated that the promotion of local government-led deliberative discussion regarding familiar policies may eventually lead to discussions at the national level. Professor Ueda considers that if the information shared and the common understanding formed when people hold deliberative discussions at the local government level can be shared beyond the boundaries of that local government, the circle may eventually expand and reach the national government level.

Mr. Tada, who has considerable experience of deliberative discussion in Kakogawa City, noted that it is difficult to set agendas in the field, and indicated that not all participants in the discussions had been entirely satisfied. Nevertheless, he stressed the importance of people discussing issues in the same forum, whether online or offline, in deepening their shared understanding and prompting them to move beyond their own positions. He also mentioned that making such a framework open rendered such factors as profit motives easier to see and correct.

Rethinking the System of Governance

Mr. Yamasaki emphasized that the process of deliberative discussion is necessary in policy-making, including the policy proposal stage, in which participants share their thinking on rational policy proposals, in order for the political process to produce high-quality and well-focused ideas and implement them. However, there is a concern that Japan's current system of governance itself may be hindering the process of deliberative discussion-based policy-making. In order for deliberative discussion to be incorporated into the policy-making process, the problems of Japan's system of governance must be challenged.

In this regard, Mr. Serikawa pointed to the fact that in Japan, the more unstable politics has been, the more progress has been made in realizing reforms. Looking back at the past, the two increases in the consumption tax following its introduction and the integrated reform of the social security and tax systems were realized when the relevant administrations were in a precarious situation. In response, Professor Nonaka emphasized that the current situation in Japan is such that a change of government almost never occurs, and pointed to the fact that the weakness of the opposition makes it difficult to realize progress in reconsidering the current system. Looking at cabinet meetings, there is inherently insufficient deliberative discussion at the ministerial level. Given this situation, it is difficult to incorporate the process of citizen deliberative discussion into policy-making at the national level; Professor Nonaka indicated the necessity of rethinking the Japanese system of governance in itself.

Recognizing the position of the administration as responsible for policy implementation in a democracy under the principle of the separation of powers, Mr. Okumura also mentioned the possibility that the ability of the administration to adequately take in up-to-the-minute information obtained from on-the-ground policy implementation and put it to work politically has declined, even in the case of policy planning conducted by that administration. This includes the results of deliberative discussion. He indicated the desirability of creating a tension (in a positive sense) between the wider political arena and the administration.

Incorporating Frameworks for Deliberative Discussion into Democracy

In order to respond to various social problems, it will be necessary to formulate policies based on consensus among citizens. To this end, it will be desirable for policy formation to be based on deliberative discussion, a process in which citizen participants recognize the current situation, understand that there are a variety of positions and ways of thinking in regard to that situation, and engage in repeated discussions in order to reach an agreement.

In order to incorporate deliberative discussion into policy formation, it will be necessary to take into consideration a range of factors, including appropriate agenda-setting and the fostering of actors able to support this process, the realization of a shared understanding and sense of involvement among participants, the introduction of platforms for multifaceted discussion that utilize information technology, and whether discussions should be held at the local or national level, in addition to the issue of resources. Furthermore, there are factors in Japan's system of governance that hinder deliberative discussion and need to be changed. There is a growing awareness of the importance of deliberative discussion involving citizens in a democracy. It is to be hoped that this will not be limited to a small number of regional examples, but will develop into a multifaceted approach involving a wide variety of actors working together.

Note

[1] NIRA Forum 2023 “Theme 1: Deliberative Democracy” was held on February 4, 2023 at Akasaka Intercity Conference Center.

[2] Intergenerational issues and reciprocity can be classified into two types: “upstream,” in which the younger generation bears the burden of supporting the older generation, and “downstream,” in which the older generation bears the burden of supporting the younger generation. (Reference: Hiromitsu, T., *Tetsugaku to keizaigaku kara toku sedaikan mondai - keizai jikken ni motozuku kosatsu* [“Using Philosophy and Economics to Solve Intergenerational Issues: A Study based on Economic Experiments,”] Nippon Hyoronsha, 2022; in Japanese)



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