Why Do the Voices of the People Go Unheard in Government?

- Aligning Public Sentiment with Government Action Through Policy Co-Creation -

Nippon Institute for Research Advancement

On February 4, 2023, the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) held the NIRA Forum 2023 on the topic of "Why Do the Voices of the People Go Unheard in Government? Aligning Public Sentiment with Government Action Through Policy Co-Creation."

As Japan's population decline accelerates along with the prospects for meaningful growth of the economic pie of its society, Japanese politics must transform into a venue for making difficult decisions around burden sharing. Politicians must exercise leadership by presenting realistic policies that are able to convince Japan's citizens that even if the choices to be made are unpleasant in the short term, that they are necessary for maximizing the happiness and wellbeing of the people, including themselves, in the foreseeable future. This goes beyond merely being responsive to the interests and sentiments voters express in the moment, but coming together with them to collaborate on the development of practical policies that are responsible in securing the long-term welfare of the people, society, future generations, and ultimately themselves.

To achieve this, the government must establish a flexible agile policymaking mechanism that enables Japan to change direction as circumstances dictate and undergirds the unity necessary to pursue reform. In service of this goal, the government must further promote the opening of administrative data and build logical arguments for its policy positions from a large array of diverse data.

Moreover, it is crucial to create a space for policy co-creation where people and politicians can engage in informal and open discussions to jointly identify socially responsible policies. This will require establishing a truly "deliberative democracy" centered on dialogue, by revising the existing democratic discussion process to ensure that people feel their opinions are reflected in policy. It will also require that politicians increase transparency and accountability in decision-making, in part by competing to offer voters real choice between multiple potential policy options based on clear public deliberation. The continued sustainability of Japan's democracy hinges on the development and deployment of the mechanisms for both agile policymaking and a more deliberative democracy.

NIRA Forum 2023 Panelists

- Karen Makishima
   Former Minister of Digital / Member of House of Representatives
- Shigeki Uno
   Professor, University of Tokyo
- Yasufumi Kanemaru
   Chairman and President, Future Corporation / Chairperson, NIRA
- Sayoko Shimoyama
   Representative Director, LinkData.org
- Tetsuki Tamura
   Professor, Nagoya University
- Masaki Taniguchi
   Professor, University of Tokyo / President, NIRA
- Noriyuki Yanagawa
   Professor, University of Tokyo

Date：2/4/2023

Location：Akasaka Intercity Conference Center AICC "the AIR"

For the opening keynote, Masaki Taniguchi, President of NIRA and a professor at the University of Tokyo discussed the following issues:

Being Responsible Today for the People of Tomorrow

The increasing tensions between the U.S. and China, along with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is deepening divisions within the international community. Until very recently, the world benefitted from increasing economic interdependence through the globalization of people, goods, money, and information, yet there is now a palpable and growing sense of uncertainty about the direction of globalization. Japan, meanwhile, stands at the forefront of a different kind of uncertainty, about the sustainability of social security systems and local communities amidst population decline driven by a low birthrate and an aging population, something many other countries are forecast to experience.

Amidst the harsh reality that we can no longer count on being able to grow the economic "pie" of society, the politics of the day necessarily revolve around the unenviable task of making difficult

decisions about how best to distribute economic pain. Thus, the theme of today's discussion, "Why Do the Voices of the People Go Unheard in Government?", does not refer merely to how people react to policies based on their calculation of whether it will be a net gain or loss personally, nor is it overly concerned with those closest to the government and political parties, whose voices already possess outsized influence policymaking. What is important is that governments, political parties, and individual politicians not only heed the expressed desires of voters, but also exercise leadership by presenting realistic policies that have their long-term interests at heart and explaining how, even if they seem like a bitter pill to swallow today, they will ultimately maximize overall wellbeing in the not-so-distant future. This means being responsive not only to the interests and sentiments voters express in the moment, but working jointly with them to develop practical policies that are responsible in securing the long-term welfare of the people, society, and future generations.

For this to work however, I believe people must be able to trust that, even when tough choices have to be made, politicians will do right by them. Such trust will make it easier for people to accept such decisions as legitimate, even if they do not actively support. Unfortunately, the reality is that the Japanese people's trust in politics is shockingly low. According to the World Values Survey, Japan ranks 41st out of 48 countries in trust in government, 38th in trust in political parties, and 40th in trust in the national legislature. This is literally a situation of " without the trust of the people, there can be no government," as expressed in the Analects of Confucius.

So, how can Japan overcome the trust deficit in its politics and find a breakthrough for consensus? It clearly cannot be achieved by merely leaving it to the government, political parties, and politicians, nor is it a matter of simply expanding traditional political participation. We need to create new spaces for policy co-creation, where the public and the government work together to find consensus through new forms of deliberation.

Next, as part of the keynote report, former Minister for Digital and Member of the House of Representatives, Karen Makishima, discussed the following issues.

Responding to an Era of Diversity Through Agile Policy Formation

When I have discussions with the younger generation in Japan, they often say things such as, "we can't see what politicians are doing," "policies are not well explained," and "politics are too complicated and difficult to understand." Thus, while on the one hand, the distance between ordinary people and politicians can be said to have narrowed somewhat in the digital age, many people still feel disconnected from politics, and rarely discuss it in their everyday lives.

To rectify this and implement policies that are responsive to the greater diversity of today's society, I believe we must urgently adopt agile policy formation. "Agile," originally a term from systems development meaning "quick and coordinated," is used in policy formation to imply "flexibility." What was right last year may not be right this year, and sometimes policy shifts are required. We need to increase flexibility in policy formation and shed the overly risk adverse mindset of policymakers who traditionally believed that "it is safer and less damaging to avoid change whenever possible."

One example of agile policy formation is the development of the vaccine record app by the Digital Agency. The development was approached with the idea of constantly updating the app based on user feedback, similar to how private sector apps are developed. Feedback was gathered from local government officials, including mayors, medical practitioners, and residents. This allowed us to monitor the daily vaccination status of each municipality through data and recognize regional differences. By considering what incentives could help us achieve our goals, public policy was able to be updated as needed. Such flexible policy formation must not be allowed to lapse as other COVID "emergency measures" have, but should instead be established as standard practice. In closing one concern I do have is that while we must be agile, we must also be wary of oversimplifying complex issues and assuming that we understand them in too short of a time. While simple explanations can sometimes be important, regularly oversimplifying complex matters risks losing sight of the truth. It is also critically important to explain things to the public in a thorough and careful manner.

Following the above remarks by Masaki Taniguchi and Karen Makishima, a panel discussion was held.

Strengthening Unity in An Increasingly Diverse Society

The rapid advancement of digitalization, and the marked increase in the diversity of individuals in society has made it more difficult than ever to find the commonalities that have traditionally fueled conversations. In the past, there were many cultural touch stones, such as popular TV shows and music that, broadly speaking "everyone knew," which made it easy to hold a conversation even with people you just met. However, the rise of the internet has led to an era where people are exposed to a much wider variety of content leading to a society where individuals have much more diverse interests. While greater diversity is, generally speaking, a positive development to be celebrated, the loss of widespread cultural touchstones, and shared experiences, has made it more challenging to consolidate opinions.

University of Tokyo Professor Noriyuki Yanagawa notes that this due to this societal transformation, which has led to a much greater diversity of opinion, so called "average" measures of public opinion are meaningless because such an average person does not truly exist. This severely complicates any attempt to develop public policy that can truly be said to be responsive to, and representative of, public opinion.

Bringing the diverse voices of the people into representative politics necessarily requires consolidating public opinion through repeated logical discussion. Without logic, discussions often end up being little more than emotional arguments. This tendency is especially prevalent on social media, where complex issues are often oversimplified and differences of opinion magnified. This radicalization of debate clouds out rationality, creating a situation in which it often becomes extremely difficult to implement even the most logical and straightforward of public policy. A thorough, more logical understanding of the differences that fuel opposing viewpoints, such as differences in values, data sources, and time horizons, should be considered the bare minimum for a more effective consolidation of public opinion.

However, such an understanding alone will still be insufficient to achieve a true consolidation of public opinion. Much like with industry associations, the voices of those whose livelihoods are affected by policy changes will often be amplified, while the rest are diminished. What is required to consolidate public opinion is a consideration for how to build trust, connections and a sense of mutual agreement amongst the public.

Yasufumi Kanemaru, Chairman and President of Future Corporation and Chairperson of the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) emphasized the need for "unity" in reform. When trying to initiate reforms, there will always be pushback from those with vested interests or those who are satisfied with the status quo. If the influence of such vested interests is strong enough, they will inevitably come into conflict with the drive for reform, and all too often this will create pressure to conform and prioritize the voice of organizations that will cause the reform to fail. Support from opinion leaders, the media, and the upper echelons of government can overcome such resistance to change and improve society. However, in Japan, a lack of such support often leads to half-hearted efforts that result only in widespread dissatisfaction, contributing to a feeling that the "people's voices are not being heard." What is needed in government are bottom-up efforts for change by younger bureaucrats, and effective leadership from senior directors and ministers in bringing them together. Rather than make excuses for why change and consensus are difficult we must work to increase unity and craft better public policy.

Democratic Decision-Making Through Basic Arithmetic

The discussions so far have revealed a limitation in the modern system of representative democracy: people's voices do not always reach the government. How can we bridge the gap between the opinions of the people and the policies pursued by those in government? Below, we explore ideas and practical tips for this, highlighting the importance of revisiting the processes of our systems of representative democratic governance.

The concept of democracy, originating from ancient Greece as direct democracy, differs significantly from the representative democracy that emerged after the Middle Ages in Europe. The former represents a system of "people having power," where ordinary people participate in politics and bear responsibility due to their participation. The latter system operates through elected representatives who express the will of the people.

University of Tokyo Professor Shigeki Uno points out that the tendency to refer to both systems as simply "democracy," creates a structural gap within society, a mismatch between expectations and reality. People are taught to believe that "Democracy" is supposed to be a system in which each individual can participate as if they were the protagonist in a story, but in reality, it doesn't work that way, creating a cognitive disconnect. This might be part of what drives the dissatisfaction of people who say "our voices are not being heard."

Discussion is crucial if we are to resolve this discrepancy. Jiro Kawakita, the developer of the KJ method, believes that democracy should be seen as basic arithmetic. It starts with "addition," where everyone's opinions are gathered. Then comes "multiplication," where opinions are allowed to clash to generate new ideas. Next is "subtraction," the process of narrowing down the options for practical policy. Finally, we come to "division," in which we assess how many people support each option. By repeatedly conducting this process it is possible to give people a sense of satisfaction, that "we participated, and our opinions were heard."

Securing Deliberative Democracy Amidst an Era of "Unheard" and "Overheard" Voices in Society

While it is often said that we are in an era in which people feel their voices go unheard, it can also be said that we are in an era in which some voices are "overheard." Opinions expressions on social media and the polarized views within society that they represent, reach politicians, political parties, and a large number of people directly. Meanwhile, the advancement of digital technology

has made photo, video and audio recording ubiquitous, so much so that we now hear even that which goes unsaid.

In the following section, Professor Tetsuki Tamura of Nagoya University points out how the problems of both "unheard" and "overheard" voices impact our society, arguing that "deliberative democracy," centered on discussion, is supposed to play a significant role in balancing out "overheard" voices.

Deliberative democracy has two major functions. The first is to convey voices that go "unheard" via the existing channels of election-based representation. Where it's difficult for people's voices to reach political parties and politicians, setting up forums for discussion can rewire the circuitry of representative democracy, restoring this essential function. Particularly noteworthy is the attempt to include "unheard" voices through the lottery based selection of citizens chosen at random to participate in discussions on specific topics, allow decision makers to hear voices that would otherwise remain unheard.

The second function of deliberative democracy is the critical role it plays in modulating the "overheard" voices in society. A successful democracy isn't necessarily one that simply delivers all voices to policymakers as is. "Overheard" voices can confuse governments, political parties, and politicians, and even lead them to disregard the will of the people. The essence of democracy lies in making decisions together as a collective 'we/us'. This necessitates each individual's willingness to consent to 'letting go of their voice' when necessary, content in the knowledge that it has been heard. Given that our perceptions can be wrong, and opinions misguided, there is a need for refinement in the voices delivered to policymakers. This is precisely where the deliberative function of democracy becomes crucial, serving to distill the multitude of voices into a coherent directive.

Of course, deliberation doesn't always result in agreement. However, even in the event that a disagreement persists after deliberation, that deliberation still serves important roles such as more widely communicating the seriousness of an issue within society and politics, leading to more considered responses and the re-evaluation of existing views. It can also help encourage mutual respect amongst those who hold opposing views, normalizing a culture of acceptance toward healthy dissent that can alleviate overt confrontation and polarization.

Advancing Data Utilization for Consensus Building

Sayoko Shimoyama, Representative Director of Link Data, advocates for sharing and utilizing data to bridge the gap between people and the government and enable consensus building.

As a leading example, she cites Barcelona's "Superblock Concept," the plan for which called for repurposing roads as public spaces, restricting their use by cars to reduce pollution and create new areas for people to interact. Barcelona successfully formed a consensus by using simulations to calculate how much traffic, pollution, and noise would be reduced, explaining the expected impact in a simple, numbers-oriented manner that ordinary people could understand. Now, the spaces once occupied by intersections have become community relaxation spots, contributing to a feeling of improved urban development.

One of the keys to this success was data accumulation. As an advanced smart city, Barcelona has installed a wide variety of sensors throughout the city. This has enabled the city to lay a solid foundation for consensus building via the routine accumulation of data in an accessible format. Another key factor was the open data initiative. In Barcelona, there is a belief that "administrative data belongs to the citizens and must be returned to them," promoting data that is open and easy to parse. This data democratization has transformed a realm that was previously the exclusive domain of policy experts and made it something accessible to everyone. Open data helps resolve information asymmetry between government and the private sector, smoothing public-private collaborations. Furthermore, ensuring people are looking at the same, accurate data, enables them to approach issues from a similar informed perspective and thus more easily engage in productive discussions.

All of that said, there are important caveats to keep in mind when encouraging the broader utilization of data. Professor Yanagawa points out that while it is critical that discussions are based on data, there also exists the danger that erroneous decisions could be made based on only a limited number of data points. Therefore, it is essential that the process of decision making be undertaken only after an exhaustive data collection phase, a comprehensive examination of the data collected, and a logical process of selecting and interpreting the most relevant information.

Here, Professor Uno noted that the deployment of more efficient and convenient tools does not in and of itself lead to more active policy discussions. In Barcelona for example, the background to its success was the active participation of its citizens. Thus, a solid foundation of mutual trust between the public and policymakers can be considered a natural prerequisite to effective policymaking. The inverse of this can be seen in Japan, where the government's attempt to deploy the My Number Card system to better manage social services has been stymied by the sense of crisis felt by the Japanese public which is extremely apprehensive of entrusting their personal information

to the government. For people to feel comfortable with the collective utilization of data, trust is key. It is through active participation in civil society that individuals come to feel embedded in grassroots democracy, and that democracy itself is fully realized.

Towards Policy Co-Creation for the Future

Throughout NIRA Forum 2023, a common theme among the panelists was how to appropriately aggregate the voices of public opinion to form a consensus amidst an era of digitalization and greater societal diversity. Due in part to a diminished sense of commonality, driven by a decline in the homogeneity traditionally associated with the middle class, and an increased emphasis on individual diversity, polarized debates increasingly dominate social media. As the panelists discussed, it is crucial not only to create pathways for delivering people's voices to those in power but also to moderate voices that are overly amplified. Achieving this balance is essential for the appropriate aggregation of opinions and for enhancing the public's sense of consensus and acceptance. The forum highlighted the need for a reassessment of the process for discussions within democracy. This involves not only designing processes that build logical arguments on a solid foundation of diverse data but also adequately explore the logical reasons why opinions differ. At the same time, those on the policy-making side must also be willing to change and ensure they are appropriately receptive to the voices of the people. Each of these points speaks to the need to embed agile policy-making processes that are attuned to societal conditions and public opinion, capable of flexibly altering their course and able to gather the necessary momentum for real reform.

No political system is perfect, which is precisely why we must engage as many people as possible in a more informal and open dialogue that can through deliberation be refined and delivered to policymakers to address society's challenges. At the same time, it is imperative for politicians to engage in genuine competition, offering voters a choice among multiple parties with differing approaches to these challenges. Furthermore, enhancing transparency and accountability in political decision-making allows for the swift correction of policies that do not achieve the intended outcomes or are otherwise erroneous. The discussions at the NIRA Forum 2023 underscore the importance of establishing mechanisms to accomplish these objectives simultaneously, which is crucial for the sustainability of our democracy.

Note

This paper summarizes presentations and discussions from the NIRA Forum 2023 held on February 4, 2023, titled "Why Do the Voices of the People Go Unheard in Government? - Policy Co-Creation Connecting People and Government." The compilation of this paper was coordinated by Atsushi Inoue, Research Coordinator and Researcher at the Nippon Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA).