

Preparing guidance for sustainability decision making

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Abstract

A team of Japan Society of Impact Assessment (JSIA) tried to prepare a guidance for sustainable decision making under the Japan legal system referring strategic thinking, sustainability assessment, and system thinking. It is divided into four levels, such as National policy, National project, Local government, and Private company. It also includes guidance for local NGOs for correspond various decision making.

1. Background of the Activities

Sustainable development and SDGs are important issues in Japan too. But most of the SDG-related activities currently taking place in Japan are backward-looking, Green Wash-like activities that are too small and disparate to solve fundamental and essential problems. To solve this problem, methods such as Sustainability Assessment, Strategic thinking, and System thinking should be used, but it is difficult to introduce them from the legal system side to Japan, where many legal systems and rules are functioning. In fact, although there are attempts to introduce Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment from the legal system, they are not functioning as originally intended. Therefore, instead of introducing or revising the legal system, we considered how to make sustainable decisions within the framework of the legal system

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that currently exists.

2. Aims of Activities

We formed a team in 2021, and while carefully reading books on Sustainability Assessment [3], Strategic Thinking guidebooks [1], system thinking [2], etc., we also studied the current legal system and procedures for urban planning by local governments, the legal system and procedures for infrastructure planning by the national government, and the decision-making procedures of the private sector. We also studied the current legal system and procedures for urban planning by local governments, the legal system and procedures for infrastructure planning by the national government, and the decision-making procedures of private companies, and had numerous discussions about what to do and when to do it to lead to more sustainable decision-making. At this point, this guidance is in draft form and is not complete, but we plan to have it completed within a year.

3. Our team member

In forming a team for this activity within JSIA, we have chosen a diverse group of members with diverse backgrounds in order to make this guidance more generic. Our team includes a former Ministry of Environment official familiar with national policies and laws, a university teacher familiar with ISO audits of private companies, a university teacher familiar with EIAs, a representative of an environmental NGO, and an environmental consultant who conducts EIAs, with the goal of creating guidance that can address a variety of activities by a variety of entities.

4. Subjects of the guidance

The guidance was intended to cover not only decisions on development actions taken by national and local governments, but also on various levels of decision-making, from decisions taken by the private sector, by small organizations, and by individuals. Because all sustainable decisions are fundamentally of the same nature, we wondered if we could demonstrate their flexibility by applying the same principles to various levels. We also thought that readers might gain a deeper understanding of the underlying principles by looking at examples at different levels than the one they are involved in. On the other

hand, the task was challenging because we would be forced to engage in an area in which we were not very good at.

5. Methods of the study

In fact, although our team members had experience with business-level environmental assessments, none of them had ever conducted a sustainability assessment, and even their understanding of sustainability assessments was limited. Therefore, our first step was to read books and reference materials on sustainability assessment, Sustainability Thinking, and Systems Thinking. Next, we organized the decision-making mechanisms of national infrastructure development, local government urban planning, and the private sector, and created a fictitious case study of sustainable decision-making. Through repeated trial and error in creating the case studies, we organized the principles of procedure that are common to all the cases. At this stage, we have only progressed so far, but we will later create notes on applying the principles to various levels of decision making and compile them into guidance. In order to get people to actually use the principles in the real world, some sort of publicity will be necessary, so we would like to update the guidance further by publicizing it in a Japanese version of TED or finding companies and local governments that will actually apply the principles.

6. Contents of the guidance

Although it is in the process of being prepared, the proposed structure of the guidance at this stage is as follows.

I. What is Sustainability Assessment?	2
A. Why do we need to consider sustainability in decision making?	3
B. What is a Sustainability Assessment?	10
II. General Criteria for Sustainability Assessment	16
A. Are we moving toward the creation of ecosystem-human interactive systems	17
B. Are we moving toward a society where vulnerable populations can live healthy lives?	
C. Are we moving towards intra-generational equity	19
D. Are we moving toward intergenerational equity?	
E. Are we promoting sustainable and efficient resource use?	

F. Are we building capacity, motivation, and transparency for a sustainable society?	
G. Are we considering prevention and adaptation to risks?	
H. Are any principles being sacrificed?	
III. Trade-off Rules	25
IV. Member Selection and Disclosure	26
V. Procedures for Setting Case-Specific Evaluation Criteria and Narrowing Down Alternatives	26
Step 1 Planning	27
Step 2 Analyze Issues and Formulate Alternatives	27
Step 3 Establish Assessment Evaluation Criteria	28
Step 4 Strengthen Alternatives	28
Step 5 Finalize Assessment Criteria and Conditions for Approval	28
Step 6 Monitoring and Course Correction	28
Step 7 Continuing the Assessment	29
VI. Introduction with Actual/Fictitious Case Study	29
A. A Father Plans to Buy New Clothes	29
B. A local government's road expansion plan	45
C. A company's plan to build a factory for new product development	60
D. A sports club's operational plan	77
E. A plan for a waste disposal site on a tidal flat	97
F. A plan to develop a venue for a World Expo	97
VII. Causes of Failed Sustainability Assessments	97
A. The final goal image differs among all consultants	97
B. Not changing the position that you are right and the other party is wrong	97
C. A big surprise by the top management	98
D. Thoroughly rejecting their own disadvantages	98
E. Unable to think freely due to existing rules	98
F. Unwillingness to accept an uncertain future	98
G. Failure to provide incentives	98
H. Failure to select members	99
I. Too much fear of being held accountable for risks associated with change	99
VIII. References	99

References

- [1] Robert B. Gibson, Susan Holtz, James Tansey, Sustainability Assessment: Criteria and Processes, Routledge, 2005.
- [2] M. d. R. Partidário, Strategic Environmental Assessment Better Practice Guide, Lisbon: Portuguese Environment Agency and Redes Energéticas Nacionais (REN), SA, 2012.
- [3] D. H. Meadows, Thinking in Systems: A Primer, Chelsea Green Pub Co, 2008.