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No Consumption Tax Raise Without Real Reform

The Cabinet decided on February 17, 2012 that the consumption tax will be raised according to the principles that the government and opposition parties drafted in January. The aim is to reform the nation's finances for the social security system. CUJ has submitted the following letter to Prime Minister Noda on February 16, demanding a number of improvements to the proposal.

To:

Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko
February 16, 2012

Please reexamine the increase of the consumption tax rate

CUJ strongly requests that the government's policy of "first raising the consumption tax" should be fundamentally reexamined.

According to the proposed reform bill, the consumption tax will be gradually raised to 8% From April 4, 2014 and to 10% from October 1, 2015. The aim is to ensure a stable source of income for the social security system and at the same time achieve healthier public finances.

The plan is to obtain people's understanding by regarding the raise of the consumption tax as a tax that is earmarked for social security. The four main areas of expenditures are the costs for the pension system, health care & medical treatment, social security, and the decrease in the birthrate. Although this plan may be carried out, we suspect that the true aim of the raising of the consumption tax rate is to use the funds as a stopgap measure to deal with the huge budget deficit.

While calling it "one reform," a concrete plan for substantial social security has not been presented. Rather, we are faced with cuts in the welfare system. The plan includes better pensions for low income earners, and mitigation measures such as nursing-care insurance. Instead, we are hearing about a reduction of pension benefits for the elderly and an increase in the burden of pension payments.

Primarily, taxes have the function of re-distribution of wealth in society while also being the funds for the nation's finances. However, the measures against the adverse effects of taxation are very insufficient in this bill.

In the case of consumption taxation, people with lower incomes are spending a relatively larger proportion of the income on items such as food. The higher the rate, the larger their burden will become. This problem has been discussed since the consumption tax was first introduced. We maintain that having the same tax rate on all goods and services is a kind of preferential

treatment for people with high incomes.

This does not achieve the function of redistributing wealth, and will instead greatly erode the taxation base as the burden on people with low incomes will increase. In the case of value-added taxes, such as in many European countries, the rates vary on different goods, and in some cases, there are zero rates for daily necessities. Through such policies the burden on people with low incomes can be reduced.

In addition, the government is going ahead with the plan to introduce a national identification number system from 2015. This system was initially proposed by the old LDP government and opposition to its introduction was a part of the Democratic Party's election promises in 2010. We have identified a number of problems with this, including privacy issues that could be especially severe for low income earners.

It is obvious that this is not a tax for the benefit of consumers, but a way to avoid introducing higher taxes on corporations. Compared to the tax systems of the US and European countries, it also places a higher burden on small- and medium-sized companies.

Rather than actually leading to a reform, the proposal will be a type of tax increase that is just a stopgap measure to deal with the budget deficit, with the result that this "one reform" will cause a lot of suffering for low income earners.

We urge the government to first reexamine the annual expenditures and reduce the fiscal deficit, before raising the tax rates. Below is a list of examples of wasteful projects and expenditures that should be cancelled and reduced:

- 1) Cancel the Yamba Dam project in Gunma prefecture, which will flood a large area and serves no real purpose as there is no water shortage.
- 2) Reduce the dependency on nuclear power by making large cuts in the budget for nuclear projects, such as the Monju fast breeding reactor in Fukui prefecture.
- 3) Stop unnecessary and dangerous vaccination schemes.
- 4) Stop funding medical examinations and superfluous medical treatment that only makes the tax-exempt medical institutions richer.
- 5) Stop the preferential treatment of the housing industry that will go through a boom before the new consumption tax rates are introduced, as people rush to buy homes.
- 6) Reduce the annual expenditures and political-party-subsidies for Members of Parliament, that are 5 times higher than in the US and European countries.

Consumers Union of Japan

Amagasa Keisuke
Koga Masako
Mashimo Toshiki
Yamaura Yasuaki

Food Additives: You Think You Know But Really You Don't

CUJ and other groups held a joint seminar about food additives at Shufuren in Tokyo on February 28, 2012. Invited speaker Nakamura Mikio made a detailed presentation about the problems, with a focus on recent developments.

Japan has recently been forced to permit some 70 new food additives that are used in the US and Europe, or face the usual trade related wrath of food exporting countries. That means 423 food additives are now allowed in Japan as of December 27, 2011. Some 350 food additives have been used for a long time, with very few ones approved since the late 1960s.

Nakamura Mikio revealed that over 3 million tons of food additives are now used annually in Japan. That means each Japanese consumer on average eats about 25 kilograms of food additives each year.

The largest share is artificial flavouring and synthetic seasoning products, that amount to over 2.5 million tons. This includes the controversial class of additives that are loosely labelled as アミノ酸 など (amino acids etc.) in Japan. 107,000 tons of synthetic preservatives are used while colouring products add up to about 23,000 tons.

Azo colours, for example, were approved in December 1970, and were among the first products that Consumers Union of Japan campaigned against back in the 1970s!

Most people don't realize that over the past five years, a number of genetically modified food additives are permitted. They often fall under the "amino acids etc." labelling requirement, thus consumers cannot easily avoid them. These include Amylase, Chymosin, and Riboflavin (Vitamin B2). Aspartame, the controversial artificial sweetener, is also made with biotechnology, and L-phenylalanine, L-glutamine, and other additives as well, with no labelling requirements.

Nakamura Mikio noted that Japan no longer produces even one kilo of vitamins – all of it is imported. For example, China now produces 80-85% of the world supply of Vitamin C. He wondered if it really is OK that Japan does not have a single factory that can make such an important product.

The process to approve new food additives includes a way for consumers and the general public to send in comments. We encourage everyone to participate in this work. Consumers Union of Japan is also working for better food labelling to make sure that consumers can choose. We have a right to know what we are eating!

By Martin J. Frid, CUJ

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Safety Standard Or Double Standard?

Consumers Union of Japan held a seminar about radioactivity and food safety at Meiji University in Tokyo on January 29, 2012.

Furitsu Katsumi, Hyogo College of Medicine, spoke about the lessons learnt from Chernobyl. Since the Chernobyl accident in 1986, in Belarus, as well as in the outskirts of the area, measures for food safety have been taken, and there is a lot of experience with the aim to protect consumers. What are the conclusions of these experiences?

Dr. Furitsu called the current approach to safety standards a double standard and expressed her concern about the ICRP radiation protection standards. Learning from the consequences in Chernobyl, it is important for consumers in Japan to measure the radioactivity in foodstuffs. The situation is very worrying notably about consumers' health, especially for young children, who are 3 times more sensitive compared to adults. For example, after the Chernobyl accident the rate of thyroid cancer increased considerably, especially among children.

After the Fukushima accident, the consequences on foodstuffs are numerous. There is a sense of crisis in the agricultural industry, for example regarding tea plants from Shizuoka, that are not possible to export. The importance of measuring the rate of radioactivity was emphasized during the conference. It was also noted that if we wash food stuffs twice, before eating them, the rate of radioactivity is reduced.

Consumers Union of Japan is denouncing the lack of openness concerning the rate of radioactivity in Fukushima prefecture and the surrounding areas, and also, the slowness of reaction from the government. Even almost one year after the Fukushima accident, most of the evacuated inhabitants cannot return to their homes, while farmers and consumer co-operatives have not yet received compensation from TEPCO.

By Emilie De Montessus (CUJ Intern from Lyon University)

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Lecture Series: Consumers' Perspective on the TPP Problem

During the APEC meeting in the fall of 2011, the Noda Administration expressed that Japan will participate in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. Mass media made it appear as if only farm groups are opposed to trade liberalization, belittling the difficulties while emphasizing the potential economic benefits. It seems that there are many people who do not understand what kind of influence the TPP will have over citizens' daily lives, also among ordinary consumers. Consequently, we started this lecture series with the theme "Food safety is being threatened."

The United States has taken the lead in the TPP discussions, with the clear aim to take control over the market in Japan. The US has made seven demands that are related to food safety

standards, including simplifying the system for rice inspection, the approval process for new food additives, and lifting Japan's strict countermeasures to fight against BSE (mad cow disease).

During the initial lecture in January, Mr. Ono Kazuoki discussed how poverty spreads across borders as a result of globalization. Mr. Amagasa Keisuke explained how the US is trying to force Japan to import dangerous genetically modified foods. The lecture was a good opportunity to consider what consumers can do with regards to the TPP problem and globalization in order to ensure safe food.

At the second lecture in February, Mr. Mashima Yoshitaka from Nouminren, the Japan Family Farmers Movement, will talk about "TPP and food sovereignty." Mr. Mashima strongly believes that securing a stable domestic food supply is more important than trade. Moreover, Mr. Yamaura Yasuaki from CUJ will discuss the importance of food labelling, and its links to basic consumer rights, namely the right to know, the right to choose, and the right to live safely. What will happen to food labelling rules if Japan participates in the TPP?

We consider that TPP is a problem that influences the daily lives of citizens directly. Our aim is to protect citizens' livelihoods from the ill effects of globalization, and to consider what consumers can do about this problem. The lecture series will continue in March.

Date: February 23, 2012 (Thu) 13:30-16:30

Place: Waseda Hoshien Center, Tokyo, Seminar House 6 ABC

Fee: 500 Yen

Directions: Subway Waseda station (Tozai line) or bus from Takadanobaba station towards Waseda Seimon, get off at the Nishi Waseda bus stop.

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Consumers Protest Against the Radiation Limits for Food

Protest Letter

To:

Komiyama Yoko
Minister of Health
December 27, 2011

First of all, we protest against the provisional limit which was set by MHLW as high as 500 Bq per kg, and which have been applied for an extended period of time.

Regarding the new limits for Caesium in food proposed by MHLW on December 21, 2011 there will be 4 categories: "General foodstuffs" (100 Bq/kg), "Food items for babies" (50 Bq/kg, a new category), "Milk" (50 Bq/kg), and "Drinking water" (10 Bq/kg).

Furthermore, these values were intended as a "proposal" to reduce the maximum allowable

dietary intake of radioactive Caesium from 5 millisievert to 1 millisievert. Below, we will point out what we regard as the problems with this “proposal.”

We are also concerned that it may take a long time before this interim measure will be reexamined.

We ask the government to consider these points seriously, and to create strict rules according to the suggestions below:

Suggestions

Ensure that the annual amount of contamination will be below 1 millisievert

Contamination by radioactive materials should be as low as possible. If we go by the recently proposed regulations by MHLW, the annual exposure of ordinary people will not be reduced to below 1 millisievert, which ICRP is advocating. Instead, the government should make every effort to reduce the internal exposure from food to as close to zero as possible.

In addition to radioactive Caesium, internal exposure also occurs due to radioactive Strontium, radioactive Iodine, Uranium, and Plutonium, etc. In addition, there is the added contamination due to external exposure. By suppressing the annual contamination by radioactive Caesium from food to below 1 millisievert, the total annual contamination can not be suppressed below the 1 millisievert level.

Although it has been reported that it is difficult to convert measurements of Strontium and Plutonium into Caesium, these nuclides also have a large impact on human health. Original standards and levels are thus needed for these as well.

It is our view that the premise by the Food Safety Commission to deal with additional contamination that is due only to food has not been fulfilled under the present circumstances.

There are many areas in Fukushima where the external exposure will be exceeding 1 millisievert due to the radioactive plume as people are breathing radioactive dust. The internal exposure due to food has also been made clear, and it is obvious that children must not be exposed to excessive contamination beyond the external exposure. Therefore, the government should aim at suppressing the internal exposure from food to zero as much as possible.

In order to protect children to the highest degree possible, there is a proposal to use 40 Bq/kg as a an independent limit for school lunches. We regard it as unacceptable that the new provisional limits from MHLW ignores this proposal.

Consider the food habits of people

After the Chernobyl accident in Ukraine, strict levels were introduced for staple foods like potatoes and vegetables that are eaten on a daily basis. The levels are 60 Bq/kg for potatoes and 40 Bq/kg for vegetables. Such consideration has not been shown by the Japanese government. We urge MHLW to take people’s eating habits into consideration.

Consideration for children is needed: Set strict limits especially to protect infants

Special consideration is needed for children, and the limits for infants should be set as strict as possible. In addition to radioactive Caesium, internal exposure also occurs due to radioactive Strontium, radioactive Iodine, Uranium and Plutonium, etc. There is also external exposure, but

the provisional limits for food are set equally to people of all ages. Moreover, even in the case of the limit for food items intended for babies, the limit is too high. For food for babies, the limit is 200 Bq/kg which is not proportional to the weight of babies compared to adults, for whom the limit is 500 Bq/kg.

The US National Academy of Sciences has clearly stated that children and also embryos are 10 times as susceptible to radiation compared to adults, which Japan's Nuclear Safety Commission has pointed out should be taken into consideration. We regret that MHLW has not sufficiently reflected this in the recent proposal.

Careful, public verification needed

Foods should be carefully tested for radioactive materials, and the results should be made public. Especially children, and coming generations yet to be born, need to be protected by the strictest possible regulations. We demand that the testing should be carried out promptly according to the precautionary principle.

Consumers Union of Japan:

Amagasa Keisuke
Koga Masako
Mashimo Toshiki
Yamaura Yasuaki

Citizens Food Safety Watch:

Kamiyama Michiko

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11,500 Participants In Yokohama Want Japan To

Change Its Thinking About Nuclear Power

The large Yokohama conference on January 14-15, 2012 for a nuclear power free world was a very well organized two day event with hundreds of lectures by speakers from Japan and abroad. I was impressed by the number of different groups and NPOs that came together to share information and experiences, 10 month after the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, and the disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant.

Held at the Pacifico Yokohama by the harbour, the event was an opportunity to think about energy issues. German MEP Rebecca Harms noted that Japan is now running its huge cities and industries on only 6 nuclear reactors out of 54. She pointed out that Germany decided to phase out nuclear power after the conservative government lost an important local election directly after March 11, 2011. Clearly angry after having just visited Fukushima, she said, "With the majority of public opinion in Japan now standing solidly against nuclear power, why the hell would Japan ever consider promoting it again?"

At one of the workshops, Swedish expert Goran Bryntse, PhD, who has led the anti-nuclear movement for a long time, talked about how citizens can change the energy policy. First of all, he noted, energy efficiency is the best and cheapest alternative to nuclear power. For example, a country can save up to one third of its energy consumption through heatpumps, more efficient engines, LED lights, and new whitegoods such as the latest refrigerators.

In the case of Sweden, these measures would be able to replace 4 nuclear reactors, according to Dr Bryntse. Additionally, 6 more nuclear reactors can be replaced by wind power (3), biomass and co-generation (2), and solar energy (1). Thus, all of Sweden's current 10 nuclear reactors can easily be phased out. Of course this is a lesson that Japan should also take note of.

At another talk session there was a panel discussion about creating a "New Japan." There is now a debate about whether to stop nuclear power immediately, or to phase it out gradually, but all of the panelists agreed that what Japan needs is clean and sustainable energy. For this shift to happen, mass media needs to change and become more accountable. The lack of democratic policies is also regrettable. There is some hope that Japan's new Green Party can put forward its first candidates in 2013. I was also impressed that people are now collecting signatures for a referendum on nuclear power.

I talked to Mr. Hideyuki Ban from Citizens' Nuclear Information Center who was deeply moved by the large turnout. He was also glad so many foreign guests were able to attend. There were many peace groups and groups representing the hibakusha from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and many old-timers who have campaigned even back when campaigning was not very popular in Japan. There were new groups of people who have been forced to deal with the unthinkable: mothers in Fukushima, worried about their kids, and lawyers trying to do the right thing to support the citizens – and shareholders – of TEPCO.

The Yokohama Declaration that was adopted sounds like something a lot of people may want to read and sign. The declaration asked for support for the people in Fukushima, and said Japanese nuclear power plants that are currently idled should not be restarted.

Peace Boat and the other NGOs that made this event happen should all be applauded for their organizing skills. I met a lot of young people who attended both days. The friendly staff and genki volunteers made every effort to guide everyone to the right venue, offering simultaneous interpretation to anyone who asked for it. The organizers had hoped for a nice round 10,000 to attend, so this event was a huge success.

By Martin Frid, CUJ

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Japan Resources is published by Consumers Union of Japan (CUJ). CUJ was founded in April 1969 and was officially certified as a non-profit organization on May 1, 2006 by the new Japanese NPO legislation. We continue to be a non-political and financially independent organization (NGO). CUJ is funded by membership fees and donations. The main concern of CUJ and its members is to realize a world of liberty and equality, a world free of economic, social and legal discrimination, and to preserve a safe and healthy environment for our children's future.

CUJ pursues the following goals on behalf of consumers: (1) To secure for ourselves and our families safe and healthy lives, (2) to establish systems/laws to protect the rights of consumers, (3) to promote peace, social justice and economic fairness, (4) to support and empower consumers who care about the environment, and (5) to cooperate with foreign consumer groups/organizations.

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