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From the Editors:

Much Ado about Food Systems

Welcome to issue No. 182 of Consumers Union of Japan's English newsletter. This time, the special theme is to share insights about the current debate about food systems, and our response to the Japanese government.

We will hold a seminar on 18 September about the controversial FAO Food System Summit. What is behind the focus on "food systems" rather than food safety or the right to food, and what does it all mean for consumers?

We hope you will stay updated with CUJ's activities, including campaigns against artificial fragrances and plastic waste, on our English website and new Twitter account.

Public Comment on the Green Food System Strategy from Consumers Union of Japan

1. Consumers are not only the target of “behavior change” but playing a main role to build safe and sustainable food systems

This comment is based on the consumer’s perspective. We believe that consumers are playing a main role regarding food and agriculture. A healthy agriculture and food system can be realized when both parties, producers and consumers, understand and cooperate each other. Looking back on the history of organic farming in Japan, the achievement has been made through a cooperative effort between farmers and consumers. One example is distribution systems created and developed through the organic farming movement, such as direct marketing and teikei, partnership of farmers and consumers. The Japanese government’s Strategy, nevertheless, only sees consumers as the target of "behavior change," as the phrase "promotion of consumer behavior change" signifies. The view towards consumers needs to be changed and put consumers at the center of main players with producers in the development of organic farming.

2. Based on the above recognition, we propose the following:

Reconsider the notion of “agricultural productive capacity increase” - The central idea of the Strategy is "improving productivity and sustainability". Here, "improving productivity" is depicted as a linear economic growth, making use of AI agriculture and genetic engineering technology and the expansion of exports. It is proposed as if improved productivity will be a way to cope with the aging and declining number of farmers, vanishing villages, and the negative impact of climate change on agriculture. The "productive capacity" referred to here is nothing but the increase in labor productivity through technological innovation. The true productive capacity of agriculture, however, is obtained by utilizing and incorporating the blessing of nature into agriculture. It is different from the "productive capacity" defined in the Strategy. We strongly request a reconsideration of the "agricultural productive capacity.”

Redefining “organic farming”

We commend that the Strategy calls for reducing chemical pesticides and fertilizers used and promoting organic farming. However, we are greatly concerned that AI and RNA pesticides are the means to achieve this. We believe that organic farming is not only about not using chemical pesticides and fertilizers, but also about growing crops in symbiosis with soil microorganisms,

insects, and other organisms. The organic farming described in the Strategy is not the same as the organic farming that we, consumers, have been seeking for with producers. The organic farming we envision and practice is one that is rooted in the nature, climate, and culture of the region and the way people live there, and one that enriches the activities of all living things in the region. The organic farming described in the Strategy does not have such a perspective at all, and in fact, it even seems to exclude nature. We cannot accept it as “organic farming”.

Do not include genetic engineering in the Strategy

We are highly concerned about the impact of genetic engineering technology on the ecosystem and food safety, and we cannot accept it even if the purpose is to reduce the use of chemical pesticides. Many consumers are seeking safety and security in organic agricultural and livestock products. An application of genetic engineering technology to agriculture and livestock from the Strategy should not be included in this strategy.

Prioritize food safety as a parts and parcel of the Strategy

The Strategy states that the creation of "innovative technological production systems" will "reduce environmental impact" and improve "labor safety and productivity". This is the only place where the word "safety" is mentioned in the massive interim summary of the Strategy, while ignoring the fact that what we, the consumers, are most concerned about is food safety. How do you plan to take "food safety" into consideration?

Include ways to enhance food self-sufficiency in the Strategy

The Strategy does not mention food self-sufficiency, despite that the central issue of the Strategy is food issue. We, as consumers, want to buy domestically produced agricultural and livestock products and hope that the safety of domestically produced agricultural and livestock products will be improved. Thus, Japan's low food self-sufficiency rate, one of the lowest in the industrialized countries, is highly problematic. Self-sufficiency issue needs to be tackled both in terms of production and consumption. The importance of food self-sufficiency should be articulated.

Set more ambitious target year and indicate the reason behind the goal

The Strategy calls for a 50% reduction in the use of chemical pesticides and a 30% reduction in the use of chemical fertilizers by 2050. It also sets the goal to increase the area of organic farming to 25% of arable land, or 1 million hectares. This is far too long a time frame. The target year, at least as the

intermediate point, should be 2030 as Europe. Also, please provide the reasonable ground for each figure.

(Translated by Kaori Hirouchi)

Comments on the Green Food System Strategy Intermediate Report for Organic Farming

The No! GMO Campaign is a citizens' group that opposes genetic engineering of food. The Japanese government's Strategy focuses on innovation using AI, biotechnology, and others to bring about increased productivity and economic efficiency. Despite that agriculture has been always managed in harmony with and based on nature, the Strategy is contrary to the true nature of agriculture. Thus, we ask for the following points to be taken into consideration.

1. Exclude genetic engineering from the Strategy

The Japanese Government's Strategy aims to reduce the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers and to promote organic farming by using RNA pesticides and other genetic engineering techniques. This is inappropriate. Consumers buy organic products for their safety and security as well as for environmental protection. The use of genetically engineered technology, whose safety and environmental impact have not been sufficiently confirmed, will seriously undermine the credibility of organic farming. In order to increase the credibility of domestic products and to develop domestic agriculture, safety and environmental protection should be emphasized above all else. We strongly urge you to remove genetic engineering technology from your Strategy.

2. Partnership between farmers and consumers

Consumer-participatory initiatives to increase self-sufficiency, such as those promoted by co-ops and other cooperative purchasing organizations, such as direct marketing and the Soybean Trust, have been promoted based on mutual agreement to reduce agricultural chemicals at the production stage and to consume the harvested products. As a result, producers have the advantage of being able to produce vegetables and other products, and consumers have the advantage of being able to obtain vegetables and other products without being influenced by market principles or weather conditions. What organic farming has been supported is the relationships of trust between producers and consumers. We request that the importance of such connections be clearly stated and protected in the future as well.

3. Pesticides

Pesticides have a more or less negative impact on many organisms in and around farmland and through ecosystems, damaging biodiversity. There are concerns not only for producers who spray them, but also for consumers who consume the harvested products. Currently, however, pesticides are advertised as safe if used properly. It does not make sense to reduce the use of pesticides while claiming that they are safe. In addition, pesticide residue standards are now being relaxed. This is the situation that needs to be changed. We need concrete measures to reduce pesticides.

4. Target years

Most of the targets are set to 2050, which we think is too far ahead. The year of the target should be 2030 as EU.

(Translated by Kaori Hirouchi)

Background Notes on Japan's Food System Strategy

The Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) published on 12 May 2021 its "Strategy for Sustainable Food Systems" (MeaDRI – Measures for achievement of Decarbonization and Resilience with Innovation)

The title and subtitle in Japanese is different from its English translation: "Green Food System Strategy, Realizing productivity gain and sustainability of food and agriculture / forestry / fisheries with innovation".

The strategy is a blueprint leading up to 2050.

The targets of the strategy include the following:

- Achieving zero CO² emission from agriculture / forestry / fisheries
- 50% reduction in use of chemical pesticides (risk-weighted) through integrated pest management and development of new pesticides (stop the use of now prevalent neonicotinoid insecticide)
- 30% reduction in use of chemical fertilizers made from imported material and fossil fuel
- Increase the area for organic farming to 1 million hectares (25% of farmland)

- Enhance at least 30% of labor productivity in food manufacturing industry (by 2030)
- Realize sustainable sourcing for imported material (by 2030)
- Expand use of elite trees and F1 hybrids in forestry seedling to 90%
- Attain 100% in artificial seedling rate in aquafarming of Japanese eel, Pacific bluefin tuna, etc

We note that while the Strategy calls for boosting organic farming, the main emphasis is the use of technology to achieve sustainable production such as the use of drones for pinpoint pesticide application and development of “super” plant varieties.

Prior to finalizing the Strategy, the ministry called for public comments on the draft Strategy as part of a normal procedure. Out of the 17,265 public comments received during the two weeks given as deadline, 16,555 were on genome editing and GMO reflecting a strong public concern on the issue. The draft Strategy was prepared by a task force within the ministry which held its first meeting in December 2020. We are very concerned that the public comment procedure remained a formality resulting only in minor revisions despite strong criticisms received.

Some experts have expressed doubts about the implementability of the Strategy which fails to show an overall picture based on principles and philosophy. As an example, Japan’s current share of land used for organic farming is a mere 0.3%, or just over 10,000 hectares, and to raise the share to 25%, or 1 million hectares, by 2050, it would need to add 30,000 hectares each year, which is more than the current area designated to organics. In addition, unlike the EU, Japan has not allocated any budget for the strategy.

Some sector experts speculate that the Strategy was prepared in haste in time for the UN Food System Summit planned in September and the subsequent COP26 climate change meeting to take place in November 2021, where Japan will need to show a high-standard target.

(Prepared by Yuri Kitagawa)

Global People's Summit on Food Systems — Against the UN Food System Summit

In September 2021, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres will convene the United Nations Food System Summit. We believe the participation and input of people engaged in family farming and small-scale agriculture, who account for more than 80% of the world's food production, should be a priority.

However, when concrete discussions began in 2020, the issues of human rights and land grabbing that small-scale farmer groups have been advocating were not at the center of the agenda, and corporations and related organizations that promote land concentration, monopolization of agricultural supply chains. Also the industrialization of food, including biotechnology, have had a significant influence on decision-making.

In response to this, many civil society organizations have begun to take action and sent a joint letter demanding a review of the summit's preparatory process, transparency in decision-making, and dialogue to achieve this, but no fundamental review has taken place.

In March 2021, groups of small-scale farmers from the Global South (Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa) announced their boycott of the UN summit and launched a counter-summit, the Global People's Summit on Food Systems.

What is it that the world's small-scale farmers, who hold the key to the future of agriculture, and the many civil society organizations that share their beliefs, want to address by boycotting the UN event?

Consumers Union of Japan is a member of the Stop Golden Rice Network (SGRN), one of the organizers of the Global People's Summit on Food Systems.

In the News: Fragrance Pollution

The following is an article on the current status of the problem of fragrance pollution in Japan written by Reiko Mizuno, Board Member of the NPO Japan Endocrine-disruptor Preventive Action:

<https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00703/the-sweet-danger-of-scent-pollution.html>

Quote: As cosmetics and fabric softeners infused with artificial fragrances proliferate, there are increasing complaints of headaches and nausea caused by the chemical substances used to create the scents. What are the risks of this new kind of air pollution?

The Japanese obsession with cleanliness is contributing to a booming market. The outcome of all of this has been a new kind of scent pollution caused by the mixture of toxic substances used to create the popular scents. And the situation is being aggravated by the microcapsules used in fabric softeners and other types of scented cleaners. The “bursts of fragrance,” “long-lasting scents,” and “nano-air-freshening” capabilities touted by manufacturers are made possible by a technology that locks fragrances and deodorants in tiny capsules made of urethane and melamine resins.

Consumers Union of Japan has formed a “Liaison Committee to Eliminate Fragrance Pollution” with six other organizations, including Japan Endocrine-disruptor Preventive Action, to work towards the eradication of fragrance pollution, or kougai (香害). It is estimated that there are several millions of people who are suffering from health problems caused by products such as scented fabric softeners, scented detergents, perfumes and other artificial fragrances. Some become so ill to the extent that are unable to go to school or work. Some have even been forced to evacuate deep into the mountains or an environment that is free from fragrance pollution.

Since 2017, we have been lobbying the central government, local governments, manufacturers and other companies in an effort to eradicate fragrance pollution.

Are you concerned about fragrance pollution? Please get in touch with Consumers Union of Japan.

Campaign to Reduce the Use of Plastics

Consumers Union of Japan is stepping up the campaign against plastic waste. We are asking major convenience stores and coffee shop chains what they are doing in Japan, as their stores in other countries appear to be moving faster to reduce the use of plastic containers and cups.

Questionnaire on Reusable Container Initiatives

To: Seven & I Holding, FamilyMart, Lawson, Starbucks Japan, Doutor Coffee

27 May 2021

According to media reports, reusable container initiatives are progressing overseas. For example, 7-Eleven in Taiwan has announced a plan to eliminate the use of all disposable plastics by 2050, and has introduced a reusable cup system in four of its stores. In addition, FamilyMart in Taiwan has also started selling lunch boxes in reusable containers. Furthermore, Starbucks in South Korea has announced that it will eliminate disposable cups by 2025. Some McDonald's stores in London, UK have introduced reusable takeout cups that can be returned to other McDonald's stores after the drink is finished.

We hope that Japanese companies will also promote reuse in order to reduce the use of single-use plastics. Therefore, we would like to ask you about your company's efforts to reuse containers.

- 1) Please let us know the material of each of the beverage and food (lunch box, etc.) containers that you provide for both in-store and take-out.
- 2) Do you have any plans to change your take-out containers from one-way containers to reusable containers?
- 3) If the plastic recycling promotion bill currently being discussed in the Japanese Parliament is enacted, cutlery and straws may be legislated (reduced use) next year. Examples of legislation methods include charging a fee, point card promotion schemes, and switching to alternative materials. It has been shown that point card promotion schemes does not reduce the amount of plastic bags used. Also, switching to alternative materials will not reduce the amount of waste. We believe that charging a fee is the most effective way to reduce the amount of waste. Let us know what your policy is.

Please join us on our new English Twitter account:



Consumers Union of Japan

CUJ is a politically and financially independent non-governmental organization (NGO). We are funded by membership fees, sales of publications and donations. CUJ was founded in April 1969 as Japan's first nationwide grassroots consumer organization.

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