

The Potential of introducing Basic Income for the “New Public Commons” in Japan: A Road to Associational Welfare State?

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1. Introduction

The importance of social inclusion has been widely recognized and hotly debated in Japan since the 2000s, as issues like poverty and social exclusion have grown more serious. Especially, the issue of social exclusion, which is explained as an absence of participation in society, really forces us to confront the question how one can find a place of one’s own in modern society where social relations have weakened and people has grown apart. Such facts are reasons why discussions over “public sphere” and “civil society” have recently increased in Japan. From a broader perspective, however, how “public sphere” and “civil society” are or should be doesn’t matter only to the issue concerning one’s place of one’s own. There is also a possibility to change forms and structures of Japanese welfare state, depending on the nature of the two.

In this paper, firstly I provide the overview of “New Public Commons”, which is one of the common political discourses concerning “public sphere” and “civil society” in Japan and now has been adopted as policy objective by the government. Secondly, I examine the expected impact of introducing basic income on development of “New Public Commons” in terms of people’s “time”. How could people’s “time” change if basic income introduces in the context of “New Public Commons”? And as a result, how could forms and structures of Japanese welfare state be transformed? These are questions to be examined in the following.

2. Key Concepts: “Time”

How could our ways of life or our lives themselves be by developing “New Public Commons”? The main purpose of this paper is to examine this question in terms of “time”. Now I would like to focus on one’s “time” as a key concept for examining how “New Public Commons” are and should be. In this respect, I owe a lot to the insightful work of Robert Goodin (Goodin 2008).

According to his work (ibid.: 3-4), time is a concept which has three properties as it follows. First, Time is inherently egalitarian. Everyone has just 24 hours in a day. Some people may value time more than others, but an hour is the same for everyone, everywhere.

Second, Time is inherently scarce. No one has more than 24 hours in a day. Some people’s projects are more time consuming than others’, and some people’s lives last longer than others’. However, virtually everyone agrees that more time would be better. That makes time a resource that is always scarce relative to demand.

Third, time is a necessary input into anything that one cares to do or to become. Some

people make better use of their time than others, getting more done in the same amount of time. Still, everyone needs some time to do or become anything. That makes time a universal good.

Then Goodin argues that what we ought to be concerned with is the just distribution of control over the resource of “time”. As he exemplifies, when we say that someone has more time than someone else, we do not mean that she has literally a twenty-fifth hour in her day. Rather, we mean to say that she has fewer constraints and more choices in how she can choose to spend her time. In this case she has more autonomous control over her own time. Such a control enables us to use our time discretionally. Goodin calls it “Temporal Autonomy”, which means a one’s discretionary control over one’s time.

From the point of view of my study, such a concept as “temporal autonomy” relates considerably to one’s income and one’s range of activities. This is really exemplified by people’s common way of life. Most people engage in some kind of work for certain hours in a day for obtaining living wage. Regardless of satisfaction with the content of her work, one must spend part (often large part) of a day for engaging in her work because we cannot afford to live without certain amount of income. In this sense, degree of temporal autonomy concerning working time is extremely low, or should rather say it is heteronomous.

As a result, engaging in paid work for certain hours in a day inevitably makes the time available for engaging in other activities limited. In this case, people’s range of activities is not expected to be expanded. This demonstrates that a proverb like “Money is a good servant, but a bad master” is really true. Even if people try to enhance degree of temporal autonomy by increasing time available for other activities, they would be forced to decrease time for paid work and therefore to reduce their income. In this case, people lose their economic autonomy instead of temporal autonomy. This situation is not also expected to help to expand people’s range of activities.

In any case, “temporal autonomy”, which we can rather say as “discretionary time”, relates to “income” and “range of activities”, and accordingly, rules people’s way of life definitively.

3. What is “New Public Commons”?

What is “New Public Commons” in Japan? This is the concept which has been commonly used by the government since first used in “the Final Report on Administrative Reform” in December, 1997. Especially this concept has been broadly recognized among the population after then-prime minister Yukio HATOYAMA, whose cabinet was launched as a result of regime change from LDP to DPJ in 2008, adopted its realization as one of the policy objectives. You can see its detailed contents in the document called “Declaration of ‘New Public Commons’” (Cabinet Office 2010), which “‘New Public Commons’ Roundtable” held by the Prime Minister put together.

According to the declaration, “New Public Commons” is based on the critical understanding of the current situation of Japan. The quotation below shows it in detail.

“As Japan developed into a modern nation state during the Meiji period, however, people started viewing public services as the responsibility of the public sector. Consequently,

decision making and the allocation of resources became concentrated in the central government. For some time, the central government bureaucrats played an important role in Japan's modernisation and in its rapid economic growth; since that time, however, these officials have lost much of their initial fervour. As a result, the Japanese public abandoned the idea that local governments should be the main provider of public services. People became less connected to each other and less involved in their communities, and it is now widely felt that each person is responsible for his or her academic achievements and for his or her own success in life. As such, individuals think of their own needs and concerns first rather than considering the public good, and people in general have lost their desire to work together for the benefit of society as a whole. However, people should remember that in Japan communities and individuals once played important roles in providing public services, and it is still possible for the Japanese public to recover this role. Collectively, the Japanese must foster the momentum for people to be reconnected to their communities by taking responsibility for working both independently and together to address the needs shared by all. (ibid.: 3)

Based on these understanding, collaboration between the population, enterprises, NPOs, and governments is especially encouraged. Collaboration is a key word of “New Public Commons”. In other words, through collaboration between various stakeholders, “New Public Commons” is aiming at building the society where everyone has a place of their own. In such a society, it is expected that “People value the pleasure of helping others, and by generating new markets and services they allow economic activity to thrive. When the fruits of such activities are properly returned to society, people can live better lives” (ibid.: 2). In this way, individuals are expected to willingly contribute, in various forms, to the society in “New Public Commons”

However, why have these arguments been appeared in Japan? In this regards, a Japanese political scientist Masahiro NOGUCHI pointed out four backgrounds below (Noguchi 2012: 64-65).

Firstly, the population have had deep distrust of bureaucratic government, especially of central government. The successive scandals of bureaucrats in the 1990s led not only to deeper distrust of the government, but also to stronger criticisms towards monopolization of the public sphere by the government.

Secondly, the importance of roles of NPOs and volunteers has been widely recognised since the Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake occurred in 1995. It is believed that the concept “the public” has been also re-considered since then.

Thirdly, the issue of social exclusion has grown serious. In the situation where People's access to medical services, education and work are restricted or denied, it is too harsh for them to be required “self-help” or “self-responsibility”. Rather, it is believed to be necessary to be included in some kind of social relations as a precondition for “self-help”.

Fourthly, an improvement of efficiency of public services has been required. It is well known how serious the budget deficit is in Japan. In this situation, the nature of public services in a conventional manner has been re-considered, and new methods like New Public Management have

been adopted. In parallel with these changes, the new trend has become common which pays attention to the roles of stakeholders other than the government, such as NPOs and volunteers in public services provision.

Consequently, “New Public Commons” is not an ad hoc policy objective, but rather the long-term one which aims at solving some structural problems in Japan.

4. Problems facing “New Public Commons”

Some projects for realising “New Public Commons” have already started. For example, systems to support infrastructure for “New Public Commons” developed as the donation tax system was reformed by introducing tax deductions for donors and the NPO law was modified by renewing NPO certification standards.

And it is also well known that a lot of people devoted themselves to volunteer activities when the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on March 11th, 2011. It is very interesting how such experiences influenced on the tendency of people’s participation in social activities like volunteering and NPOs. However, more detailed and long-term analyses are necessary to be explained. Instead, in this paper, I examine some problems against realizing “New Public Commons”, according to the result of the statistical survey which was conducted before the earthquake.

One of the problems facing “New Public Commons” is the gap between the government’s expectation and people’s attitude, and the one between people’s ideal and their reality. According to “National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences”¹ in 2010 (Cabinet Office 2010), the proportion of people participating in social activities was only 26.0%. And while the proportion of people ready to participate in these activities amounted to 49.1%, the proportion of people unwilling to participate in these activities occupied 45.1%.

These results show that the proportion of people participating in social activities was considerably low despite the government’s high expectation. But at the same time, they also show the proportion of people ready to participate in these activities amounted to near half of the whole. This means there are a number of people that can’t participate in these activities against their wishes. But why they can’t? Here I would like to consider this reason by focusing on answers to the question concerning infrastructures necessary for encouraging people’s participation in social activities. In particular, answers concerning taking leave are worthy of attention. In this regard, a relatively high proportion of people (35.2%) answered that it is necessary to make the paid leave easier to be used, or to make the leave easier to be used for volunteering. Such answers indicate that a number of people cannot afford the time by spending for their work, and some of them want their income to be supplemented because they could lose some amount of income if they participate in social activities

¹ “National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences” is conducted annually by Cabinet Office. In this paper, I used the survey data of the 2009 fiscal year which was conducted in March, 2010. So in fiscal 2011 and 2012, the same survey was done, but I didn’t use them because of uncertain factors caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake, as I told above. However, trends concerning participation in social activities has remained through the 2000s

instead of their works. And more than anything else, it is difficult to take leave as one likes, while working hours in Japan have become highly ranked in the world, as is well known.

Another is that “New Public Commons” is not necessarily a prime concern for the population. According to “National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences”, in reply to the question what kind of policy objective the government should aim at in terms of enhancement of social welfare, answers concerning improvement of social security system became highly ranked. On the contrary, the proportion of the answer concerning “realization of the society where individuals actively contribute” occupied only 6.0%. These results show clearly that the population prefer a guaranteed security of their lives to their contribution to the society. It looks quite obvious. But traditionally in Japan, while state welfare has not been fully developed, people’s lives have been highly dependent on mutual support between family members, lifetime employment, and generous welfare programmes within a company. Taking these facts into consideration, people’s lives have been suffered from labour flexibilization and rapid progress of aging in recent years. Thus the results above reflect really hard situations of their lives.

5. Expected positive effects of introducing basic income for “New Public Commons”

Now let me examine some effects of introducing basic income in favour of “New Public Commons”. First, needless to say, basic income can deliver the unconditional social security at the basic level, with protecting the “vulnerable” as a full and equal citizen. The unconditionality and universality of basic income not only prevent people suffering from false bureaucratic discretion, but also guarantee a certain level of stability of people’s lives even under unstable economic situation. It substantially depends on the level of income provided, but it could fully guarantee a right to live². Because guaranteeing security of people’s lives is suitable for their needs which have already indicated above, introducing basic income can be an effective device for fulfilling their needs.

Second, another important point is that basic income can make “free time” Obviously basic income can enhance one’s economic autonomy. But if we see basic income as a tool for enhancing the ability to buy things, say, “purchasing power”, basic income is equivalent to wage obtained by decent work. Rather, a distinctive feature of basic income compared to wage is making free time in itself by dividing the relationship between “income” and “time”, and enhancing “temporal autonomy”,

Then, making free time can reduce as much as possible constraints on expanding range of activities, regardless of one’s preference. Therefore introducing basic income enables people to participate in social activities and other activities more easily through fulfilling their needs both for income and for time. This will be of great help to development of “New Public Commons”. Moreover, it would be possible to provide basic income combined with other conditional system like participation income, or voucher in a broader sense. From the standpoint of a vision for “New Public

² In this regards, I have to say that basic needs and general needs should be fulfilled distinctively, as Hirst pointed out in his work (Hirst 1994: 177-184). Therefore the level of basic income depends on one’s specific needs

Commons”, this combined version would be more suitable. In any case, by introducing basic income, “New Public Commons” could be a model for building such society as “diverse reciprocity”³(Fitzpatrick 2003) comes true.

6. Conclusion and some implications

In this paper, I provided the overview of “New Public Commons” and its problems to be solved. Then I examined the expected positive effects of introducing basic income on development of “New Public Commons”, in terms of people’s “time” and “range of activities”.

In conclusion, it is shown that introducing basic income can make one’s free time and as a result enhance their “temporal autonomy” without losing “economic autonomy”. This helps a realization of society where individuals can contribute in various forms, recommended in “New Public Commons”. Interestingly, this proposed combination basic income and “New Public Commons” seemingly approaches to a variant of “associational welfare state” (Hirst 1994). Can they really become Japanese version of “associational welfare state”? From the point of view of “time” or more precisely “temporal autonomy”, I have to say it depends on the level of basic income. The lower its level is, the lower its power to enhance “temporal autonomy” becomes.

As I indicated in this paper, time is a resource essential for human life. In addition, in modern society where people (often must) engage in various activities, making time for them become more important. In this sense, providing security for making free time, or enhancing “temporal autonomy” should be focused on as a new goal of public policy. Basic income could become a very effective and simple device for its realization.

³ Concerning “diverse university”, Fitzpatrick explains as it follows (Fitzpatrick 2003: 50-51). First, diverse reciprocity cannot be separated from the background conditions of social justice or injustice which means not only social inclusion but also material equality should be demanded. Second, it regards rights as unconditional base of the social self. Third, as it is social in orientation in that obligations are thought to correlate to powers, we may possess rights without obligations and vice versa, and wage earning should not be regarded as the prime contribution. Fourth, it is general in that the citizenship should not be reduced to a form of rational market exchange and we should adopt a hands-off approach to social participation for maintaining the equilibrium of social give and take.

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