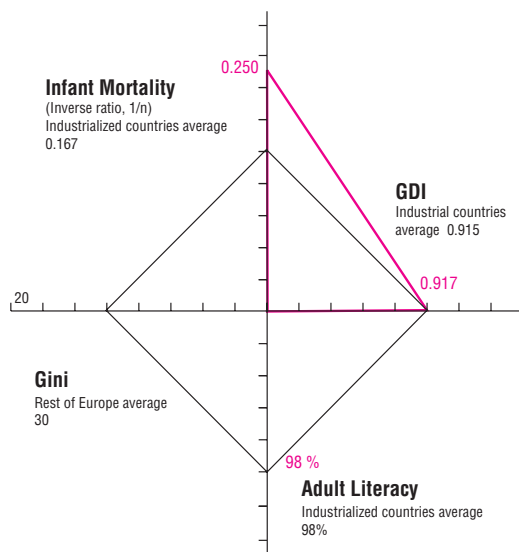


• NISHIKAWA JUN
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The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.
 Source: **Infant mortality:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*, **Adult literacy:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*, **GDI** (Gender Development index): UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998*, **GINI:** World Bank, *World Development indicators 1998*. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by *Social Watch*).

The government released its WSSD follow-up document «National Strategy for Social Development» in April 1998. During the drafting of the National Strategy, the Japan NGO Forum on Social Development dialogued with the government twice and submitted its comments on the document, but although several views presented by NGOs were included, there is no agreement in the usefulness of the final document.

National Strategy includes sections on: stabilisation of employment; creation of a gender-equal society; promotion of social integration; support for socially vulnerable people; human

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resources development and creation of «an affluent learning environment»; preservation of the environment; and promotion of social infrastructure improvement.

Although the document mentions several issues raised by NGOs (such as co-operative work), it says nothing about two major WSSD commitments: Commitment 1 (enabling environment) and Commitment 2 (eradicating poverty). With respect to Commitment 1, the government has no clear, fundamental position on how to promote and implement social development. This is reflected by the agency charged with preparing the strategy. NGOs demanded that a single implementing office be created to promote social development. The National Strategy was prepared, however, by the Human Rights and Refugee Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with reports collected from 23 ministries.

Regarding poverty, the National Strategy says «[T]he livelihood protection system ... guarantees a minimum standard of living to all people who are too poor to maintain a decent standard of living on their own, so that they can afford a wholesome and cultured life and develop the ability to support themselves.» This statement is typical of government officials who think that once the system is in place, the social problem is solved. But poverty in Japan is becoming more serious.

At present, there are at least 20,000 homeless people throughout the country. Of these, 8,000 are in Osaka and 5,000 are in Tokyo. The number of homeless is increasing mainly in the big cities. The rapid increase in homelessness after the collapse of the bubble economy is the result of prolonged recession and the structure of Japan's construction industry. Before the economic collapse, the industry recruited day workers at «yoseba» (places where they gathered to find work). Now, rather than recruiting at «yoseba», the industry easily gets enough workers through newspaper ads. As a result, old day workers at the «yoseba» are excluded from employment and forced into homelessness. Almost one million people are on public assistance and this number is increasing. The government's National Strategy, however, completely ignores this poverty issue in Japan.

Another indicator of poverty in Japan is the unemployment rate. The official employment rate is 4%. It was above 5% in May 1999, much higher than the 2% level of 1995. The nature of unemployment has also changed. It affects not only persons of middle and advanced age but also high school graduates. The

Ministry of Labour calculated that one of four workers in the construction industry would become unemployed in the next ten years. This means that, out of 6.7 million workers, 1.7 million will lose their jobs. In the financial sector, ten per cent of employees are expected to become unemployed.

The National Strategy contains not a single word about this serious unemployment issue. But beautiful phrases like «job creation utilising the vitality of small and medium-sized companies» are found on almost every page. In reality, these are the companies most affected by the prolonged depression. Another example is in the field of education. The National Strategy mentions the creation of «an affluent learning environment» without reference to the fact that nearly 100,000 children refuse to go to school and in-school violence is happening all over Japan. In the area of social integration, the Strategy stresses that the government pursues strict implementation of the Employment Quota System for Persons with Disabilities. But this ignores the sad reality of big Japanese companies that prefer paying fines to abiding by the law.

Another problem with the National Strategy is that it is a patchwork of previously existing policies and action programmes. The government has not discussed new initiatives fitted specifically to the Copenhagen Commitments. This is why the Strategy does not mention serious social issues that currently confront Japanese society, such as deregulation, financial reform and restrictions on the freedom of information.

Since Japan is experiencing drastic social transformation, the government should provide a vision for social development in the year 2000 and beyond. Without such a vision, the government will have a hard time persuading civil society to work with it. This lack of a clear vision for Japanese society is one of the most crucial social and political problems in the country.

We appreciate that cooperation with NGOs is mentioned in the National Strategy. If we look into the details, however, the Strategy mentions past meetings for information and opinion exchange. If the government is to create partnerships with free and representative organisations of civil society, it must promote and support development of NGOs and other voluntary civil organisations. Such civil organisations are key actors in reviving communities and promoting international cooperation. Therefore both NGOs and the government should have more talks to reach mutual understanding. In this context, every ministry should institutionalise a regular dialogue with NGOs, which include discussion of decision-making processes, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies. This kind of practice would play an important role in promoting social development.

Japan's National Strategy for Social Development reveals a huge gap between NGOs and the government regarding the ten Copenhagen commitments. In particular, the National Strategy fails to present a fundamental vision for social development that could provide a basis for the transition to a human-centred society.

- *Japan NGO Forum on Social Development. Active member organizations are: Pacific Asia Resource Center (PARC); Japan Trade Union Confederation (JTUC-RENGO); International Movement Against all forms of Discrimination and Racism-Japan Committee (IMADAR-JC); Asia Disability Institute; People's Forum 2001; Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA).
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