

# Formulating Policies That Align with Japanese Values

## - Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Policy -

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NIRA Forum 2023, “Theme 2: Formulating Policies That Align with Japanese Values: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Policy,” discussed attitudes toward Japan's COVID-19 policy.

When people evaluate policies, they are influenced by their values. In order to convince people to change their behavior in accordance with government policies during an emergency such as a pandemic, policies must be developed that align with their values. The prerequisite for this is that the public form opinions based on scientific findings. It will be essential to improve data literacy, as it relates to the creation and interpretation of data, among the public.

At the same time, we should be concerned about the influence of the media. Sensational images and the like can change an individual's thinking even without being backed up by scientific data. Traditional media should play the role of conveying complex information in an easily-understood manner without succumbing to the lure of sensationalism.

Furthermore, in order to communicate the findings of experts to the public and reflect them in policymaking, we need human resources who are able to synthesize those findings, rather than listening to the opinions of a narrow range of experts.

The pandemic should not be treated simply as a one-off event. It is necessary to tenaciously review and analyze such factors as the things that occurred during the pandemic, the processes by which they occurred, and the effects of the policies that were applied. Learning from the pandemic and developing policies aligned with Japanese values can help to increase our ability to respond to risks.

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## **Participants in NIRA Forum 2023 “Theme 2: Formulating Policies That Align with Japanese Values - Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Policy”**

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- Kai Kajitani  
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The global spread of COVID-19 transformed the world. While other countries implemented lockdowns and the mandatory wearing of masks in order to prevent the spread of infection, Japan adopted countermeasures to the virus based on a request for “self-restraint” from its citizens. Approximately three years after the outbreak, this request for self-restraint was relaxed, and COVID-19 has been reclassified as a Class 5 infectious disease. The time has come to look back on Japan’s COVID-19 policy and discuss how it was received and how we should view the characteristics of Japanese society based on reactions among the public.

NIRA Forum 2023 “Theme 2: Formulating Policies That Align with Japanese Values: Lessons learned from COVID-19 Policy” brought together experts involved in Japan’s

COVID-19 policy in a variety of capacities to discuss the public’s attitudes toward the policy (Note 1).

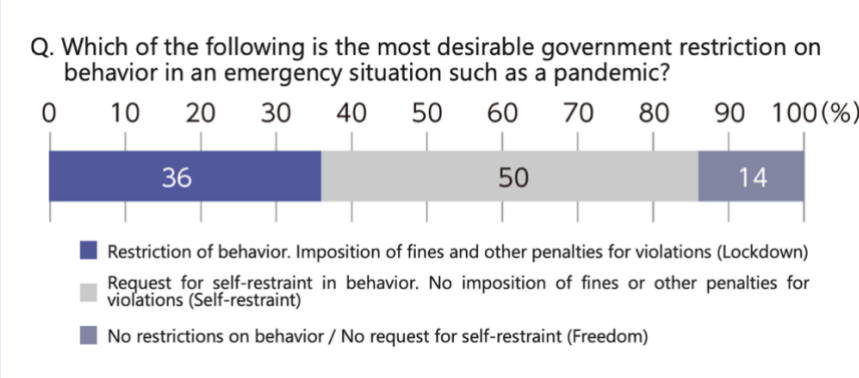
## The Japanese Public Wished to Protect the Vulnerable, but Preferred to Avoid Lockdown

Last year, NIRA launched a research project on the theme of “freedom and equality,” and has since conducted ongoing discussions. In order to understand the Japanese public’s sense of values regarding freedom and equality, we took Japan’s COVID-19 policy as a case study and conducted a questionnaire survey concerning policy and public behavior during the pandemic. At the beginning of this Forum, Professor Uno raised a number of issues based on data garnered from this survey.

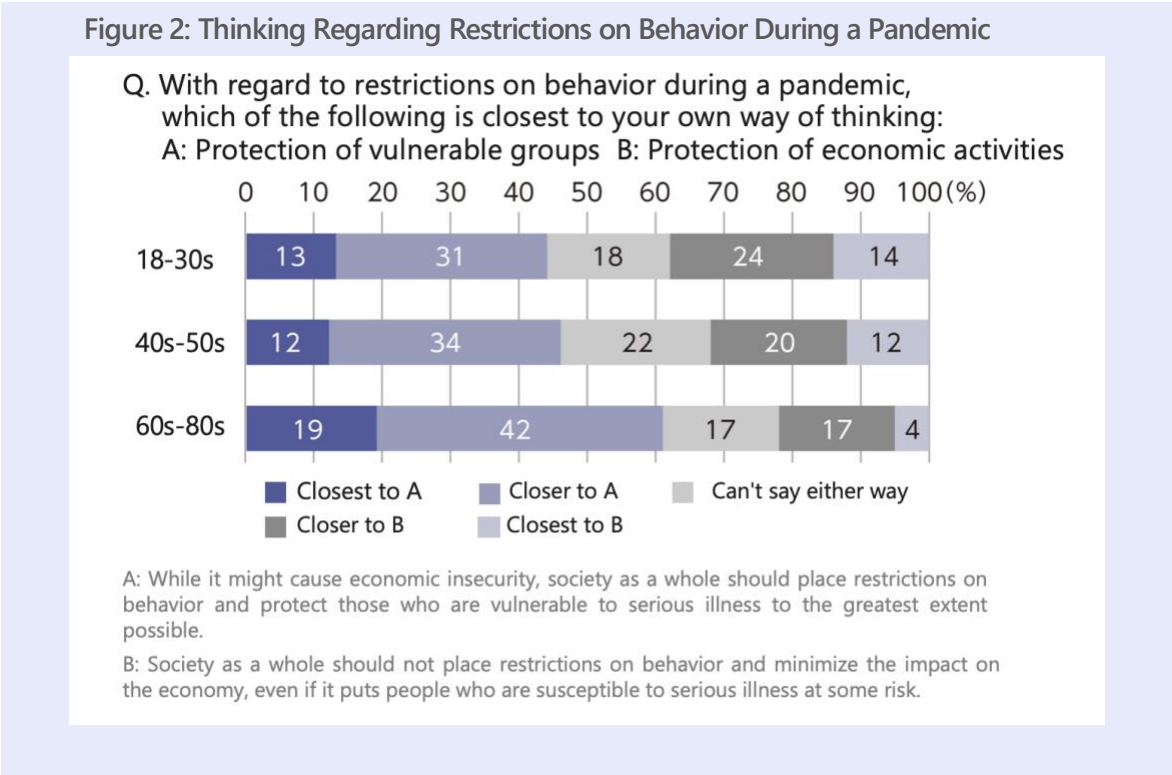
The survey yielded several very interesting results, which are helpful in allowing us to understand Japanese attitudes toward freedom and equality, as discussed below.

First, the Japanese are tolerant of restrictions on freedom. With regard to government restrictions on behavior in an emergency situation such as a pandemic, half of the survey respondents indicated a preference for a request for “self-restraint” (Figure 1). The data produced by the survey is striking in that it shows that while the overwhelming majority of Japanese would choose freedom if asked to choose between freedom and equality, at the same time, Japanese people support the idea of self-restraint. In addition, when asked to choose between two methods other than self-restraint - “lockdown,” which restricts behavior, and “freedom,” which does not restrict behavior and which involves no request for self-restraint - more people preferred “lockdown” than those who preferred “freedom.”

Table 1: Desirable Government Restrictions on Behavior

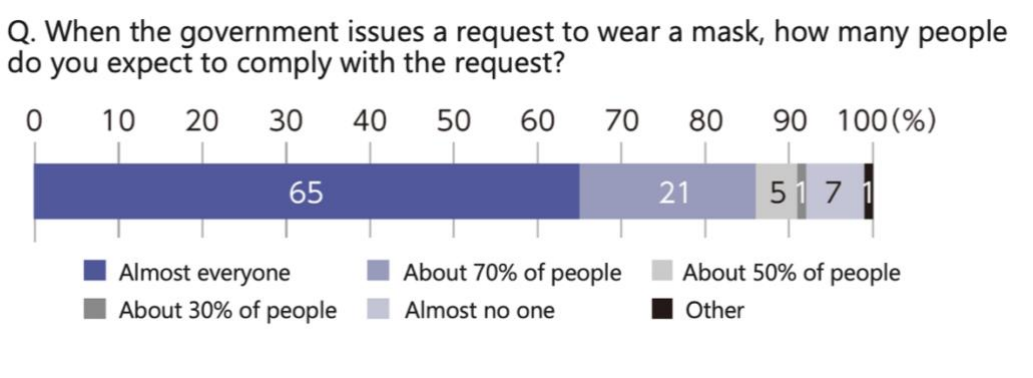


Second, with regard to restrictions on behavior, the majority of respondents were of the opinion that priority should be given to protecting the vulnerable, such as the elderly who are more susceptible to serious illnesses, rather than the opinion that priority should be given to minimizing the impact on economic activities (Figure 2). By age, the number of respondents who answered that priority should be given to protecting the vulnerable increased with the age of the respondents. This is understandable given the higher rate of serious illness among the elderly.



Third, those who chose self-restraint had high expectations that others would behave similarly. With regard to these expectations of others' behavior, when respondents were asked to what extent they expected others to comply with a request to wear masks, it was found that as many as 65% expected “almost everyone” to comply (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Expectations of Others in the Event of a Government Request to Wear a Mask



However, results also suggested that going too far in this direction could lead to pressure to conform being placed on others. Respondents who agreed with the statement “The majority of citizens are good and relying on the uprightness of citizens is the foundation of democracy” as a reason for supporting the request for self-restraint had higher expectations for others to wear masks than those who agreed with the other arguments (Table 4). If we consider the expectation to wear a mask as a type of pressure to conform, this is an example that suggests that expectations for civil society and pressure to conform in society are two sides of the same coin.

Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents in the “Self-Restraint” Group Who Answered “I Expect Almost Everyone to Wear a Mask”

Point in question	People who agreed with the statement	People who did not agree with the statement	Difference
A lockdown would severely limit economic activity and leave some people unable to make ends meet	69%	69%	0%
Being confined in a small space causes a high level of mental stress and leads to a lack of exercise and a reduction in physical fitness	67%	71%	-4%
The majority of citizens are good, and relying on the uprightness of citizens is the foundation of democracy	75%	65%	10%
Forcing citizens to constrain their behavior is absolutely contrary to democracy	70%	69%	1%

It is clear from these survey results that the evaluation of COVID-19 policies is influenced by people's values, and in order to convince members of the public to change their behavior, policies must be developed that align with the values of the Japanese people. It will be necessary to discuss what we can learn from the experience of COVID-19 measures and the type of policies that might be put in place in order to lead to improved policymaking. With this, Professor Uno concluded his statement of the relevant issues.

Adding to Professor Uno's remarks, Professor Sonoe Omoda of Meiji University, who specializes in European thought, and Professor Yasushi Watanabe of Keio University, who specializes in American thought, both of whom were involved in the research project, raised the following points.

Professor Omoda raised the point of how to interpret the twin dichotomies of “freedom or lockdown” and “prioritizing the economy or protecting the vulnerable” when considering survey questions. She indicated that the survey results show that there is not a clear division of opinion, but instead a rather loose distribution, which is, in a sense, a Japanese characteristic. In this connection, Professor Watanabe emphasized that freedom for the Japanese is not a matter of adherence to principles, as in the case of US libertarians, but of adaptation to changing circumstances with consideration of media reports and public reaction, demonstrating the ambiguity of the Japanese awareness of freedom and equality.

## **The Need for Formulation of Data as the Basis for Policy Coordination**

Toshihiko Suzuki, who was the Administrative Vice Minister of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in the early days of the pandemic, and is now the Vice President of the Japanese Red Cross Society, faced the pandemic as the head of the administrative staff for almost nine months, from the outbreak of COVID-19 until the second wave was contained. Mr. Suzuki pointed out that politicians strive to reflect public opinion in policy-making, and it is therefore important that public opinion is formed based on scientific findings. He recalled the situation during the pandemic as follows.

Given that the nature of COVID-19 was unknown, various conflicts of interest arose. For example, there were conflicts between individuals, such as young people who wanted to go out and be active and the elderly who did not want to be infected, and between individuals and society more generally, for example in the case of businesses that wished to stay open and members of the general public who wanted to reduce the spread of the disease. In order to avoid such conflicts to the greatest extent possible, policymakers searched for an “optimal point,”

adjusting the level of the measures they put into effect, moving between regulation, for example restrictions on going out and the operation of businesses, the provision of subsidies, for example for employment and medical expenses, and maintenance, for example of vaccination systems, exactly as if they were adjusting a dial. This adjustment process was repeated continuously while considering the public's reaction and making overall judgments as the situation changed from moment to moment.

Mr. Suzuki also warned that an increasing number of people have lost their jobs and their livelihoods due to COVID-19, and that these effects may come as a body blow throughout society in the future. The generation which entered the workforce during the “employment ice age” following the collapse of Japan’s economic bubble are still feeling the effects. Mr. Suzuki pointed out the need to build a robust society through shared awareness, to ensure that the effects of the pandemic will not be further prolonged, and his thinking is persuasive.

Next, Professor Shinya Matsuda of the University of Occupational and Environmental Health, an expert on Japan's COVID-19 policy, spoke about the challenges faced by the Japanese healthcare system during the pandemic. He emphasized the need for Japan to continue working on creating a system that can further boost the impact of its frontline response, while comparing Japan’s response to the US response.

Professor Matsuda indicated that in Japan, it will be necessary to consider how to improve literacy in relation to the creation and interpretation of data. Systems allowing an understanding of epidemiological information regarding infected persons, the status of utilization of hospital beds, and immunization status, in addition to systems to provide alerts to people who had contact with the infected, were created piecemeal and were not effectively coordinated with each other. The reason for this is the lack of a system of social security numbers. The inability to use social security numbers while managing a crisis is a fatal flaw. In order to create networks, the first step will be to realize a shared understanding of the significance of such systems. It will be essential for the government to display leadership in this area.

## **Immediate Reversal of Policy from the Top**

In contrast to Japan's policy of self-restraint, China took a different approach, implementing a lockdown. Professor Kai Kajitani of Kobe University, a specialist in the Chinese economy, emphasized the fact that in China, during the initial response to the pandemic, it appeared to

be the case that survival and freedom were pitted against each other, but this conflict can be seen as having changed in a short period.

Professor Kajitani indicated that the Chinese people supported the lockdown under the nation's zero-COVID policy and accepted that their freedom would be restricted if it was for the sake of survival. People seek freedom because they are alive. While survival and freedom cannot be opposed, the Chinese government was able to convince the public to relinquish freedoms by putting survival and freedom in conflict.

Later, however, as the Omicron strain spread and the number of cases increased rapidly, people began to see the zero-COVID policy as a burden. In November 2022, as people failed to escape from a fire in the city of Urumqi and “white paper revolutions” were launched in various regions, the recognition that China's extremely strict lockdown was more harmful than COVID-19 began to spread among the public. Sensing these changes, the central government announced ten new measures in December, leading to the abandonment of its zero-COVID policy.

Professor. Kajitani then pointed out that this demonstrated that while death from COVID-19 had previously been “unacceptable, “it had now become “acceptable.” In other words, it became seen to be acceptable for people to die from an infectious disease. He emphasized that the only difference between China and Japan is that in China, this change in attitude occurred over a period of about 10 days, while in Japan, it is happening more slowly.

## **Social Media Is Increasing in Importance, but Traditional Media Continue to Have a Significant Influence**

In the midst of a pandemic, the impact of the media on society is immeasurable. In Japan, trust in traditional media such as newspapers and magazines is considered to be high compared to other countries. How did the traditional media in Japan respond to the pandemic?

Aya Igarashi, editor-in-chief of Chuo Koron, stated that the type of information one is exposed to is the key to determining one's choice of action. The pandemic created a situation in which information with little scientific basis (for example anti-vaccination information), rumors and conspiracy theories became widespread. She emphasized that in a crisis such as a pandemic, traditional media should play a role in conveying complex information in an easy-to-understand manner.



During the surge in the number of people infected with COVID-19 and immediately after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the public was focused on news obtained from newspapers. This was presumably due to the fact that when people sought accurate and reliable information, they relied on the information published by newspaper companies, which have organized coverage networks and long-term experience. At the same time, the influence of traditional media is declining because, in the digital space, “sensationalism” attracts more attention than “accuracy,” and this is encouraging the spread of “fake news”. It is urgent that we restore trust in the traditional media, and to do so, it is important not to take the path of sensationalism, as in the case of social media, and to focus on data-based journalism in cooperation with scientists and researchers.

Medical anthropologist Maho Isono expressed concern that the responses adopted temporarily in order to calm the pandemic-related panic will become permanent. Even if a policy is found to have little scientific basis, if it is deemed to have contributed in some way to calming panic among the public, the policy will be carried over year after year. In addition, this panic is triggered by sensational images and stories in the media.

For example, in September 2001, an NHK special aired footage of a young girl infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE; commonly known as mad cow disease); following this, Japan's first BSE-infected cow was discovered. This triggered full-scale examination of all cattle in the nation in order to calm the resulting panic among the public. This testing continued for 10 years, despite the fact that it was said to be scientifically meaningless because testing could not detect the virus in young cattle. Similarly, in the case of the HPV vaccine, intensive media coverage of adverse reactions led to medical professionals withholding active recommendation of vaccination, a situation that lasted from 2013 to 2022. The media's sensational images and stories draw people in, and they become willing to do long-term harm, and in some cases expend huge budgets, if it means avoiding the worst of what these images and stories indicate. With regard to the recent pandemic, Professor Isono pointed out that a similar trend could be seen in excessive risk avoidance measures being adopted for end-of-life care and funerals, the death of a public figure acting as one trigger.

She continued by offering the following hypothesis: One of the spurs for reining in over-reaction to events is external pressure or the recognition of differences in responses to those of other countries (mainly Western countries): in the case of blanket BSE testing, it was trade friction with the United States over beef; in the case of the HPV vaccine, it was recommendations by the WHO and the normalization of vaccination in Western countries. With regard to the change in Japan's response to COVID-19, there was a clear difference between Japan and other

countries that had already returned to a normal life. Although it is difficult to discern a causal relationship, this is something that should be taken into consideration when looking at the factors behind policy changes.

## **Identifying Experts and Synthesizing Knowledge**

Professor Watanabe stated that in emergency situations, it is important to provide the public with expert knowledge and findings.

A system is required by means of which the foundation for policy is expert knowledge, and the media communicates this knowledge to the public. Politics should never take precedence over science in such cases. In the absence of such a system, it could be the case, to take the pandemic as an example, that Japan would still require the wearing of masks two or three years after other countries.

The question is, who are the actual experts? The pandemic saw many people claiming to be experts, but the general public could not judge whether they were or were not trustworthy. The discernment of the media and/or the government is the question here. If experts can be identified and their findings can be successfully communicated to the public and reflected in policy in any future emergency, Japanese society will be able to respond on the basis of self-restraint.

Related to this, the following remarks from Keita Nishiyama, a Visiting Professor in The University of Tokyo's Institute for Future Initiatives, concerning the need for human resources able to synthesize the opinions of experts, are important.

In the case of the accident that occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, we certainly heard from commentators recognized as experts, but there were not enough people able to synthesize their knowledge. The government should have the ability to procure and synthesize the necessary information as the situation changes from moment to moment, but it seems that this ability is lacking, irrespective of the specific area of policy. As a result, Professor Nishiyama feels that time is being spent focusing only on a narrow range of expert opinion. Since the Fukushima Daiichi accident, the treatment of contaminated water has become an important issue, and one which cannot be responded to solely by those with expertise in the fields of nuclear power and energy.

Professor Nishiyama also indicated that there is a tendency on the part of academics to focus on the mastery of a narrow area of expertise. He emphasized that while this is necessary in terms of increasing expertise, what is truly needed when crises occur is the synthesis of knowledge.

The discussions held in this session made us keenly aware of the necessity, rather than treating the pandemic as a unique event, to be persistent in examining and analyzing the things that occurred, the processes by which they occurred, and the effects of policies.

As a result, when the next emergency occurs, we will be able to make decisions that realize a balance between the needs of individuals and society as a whole. The bases for such decisions are the fundamental values of freedom and equality. Formulating policies that align with the values of the Japanese people will strengthen the ties between the people and the government and increase trust in the government. This, in turn, will improve our ability to deal with the challenges and risks we face. We will continue to examine strategies that enable our society to flourish while facing a variety of risks.

## Note

- [1] NIRA Forum 2023 “Theme 2: Formulating Policies that align with Japanese Values - Lessons learned from COVID-19 Policy” was held on February 4, 2023 at the Akasaka Intercity Conference Center.



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