

other hand, developing countries will have to face both a population explosion and aging at the same time. Actually, even now, 62% of the elderly people in the world live in developing countries but this number will rise to 80% in 2050. Interest among people on the aging issue will soon grow rapidly in developing countries as well.

How are other countries trying to tackle this issue?

The UN came out with a directive to utilize the elderly as an “asset” for society. Also, social inclusion of the elderly is a big target for the European Union (EU). It is an international trend to encourage the elderly to make social contributions which are not limited to paid work but include volunteer work.

What are the characteristics of Japan’s aged society from an international perspective?

In Japan, the aging of the population came after the social security system and the social infrastructure were well established along with good economic growth. So, we were able to lead the world to set up a framework to tackle the issue. Japan has the longest healthy life expectancy in the world as well as the most advanced preventive healthcare and dementia policies. Both developed and developing countries are eager to learn from Japan.

What are the challenges?

In terms of family relations, the percentage of Japanese elderly who live with their children is higher than that of Western countries and the percentage living alone is lower. Philosophy and a culture of independence and mutual assistance based on individualism are already rooted in Western countries. Family relations and household composition are changing drastically in Japan but our society and people’s mindsets are not keeping up with them. So we are seeing problems in various aspects such as housing, nursing care, and end-of-life care. We need to reestablish a community where we support the elderly living on their own and individuals also need to build their own networks which are not dependent on blood relations.

So society's attitudes need to change?

Our society still tends to lump all elderly together and see them as “people we need to support.” However, there will be many vigorous elderly people in the coming aged society. It is better to utilize their knowledge and experiences in our society rather than just putting them aside as “people who need support” as soon as they turn 65 years old. Elderly people also need to use their imagination for how the society will be in the future and realize their responsibilities. Japan has a responsibility, as the country with longest life expectancy in the world, to show a new model of the elderly in society.

(Interviewer: Masafumi Tatematsu, Asahi Shimbun, in Oct. 6, 2012)

■ The percentage of people who are over 65 among the population and its projected numbers in major countries

	1950	2010	2050	2100
Japan	5	23	36	32
China	5	8	26	28
USA	8	13	21	26
UK	11	17	24	28
Thailand	3	9	25	27
Brazil	3	7	23	30
Egypt	3	5	14	27

Unit is % and rounded off to the closest whole number. This is based on a resource from National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

From Asia to Africa — Plunging into an aging society one after another

Japan's population aging rate reached 23% in 2010 and particularly worth noting is the speed of aging. It took 24 years for the population aging rate to go from 7% to 14% in Japan. In contrast, it took 126 years for France, 85 years for Sweden, 61 years for Italy and 40 years for Germany.

In the near future, Asian countries like South Korea and China will be exposed to the wave of rapid aging. Moreover, countries in South America and Africa will be entering the aging society one after another.

Yoko Shido

Secretary General, International Longevity Center Japan

After graduating from Japan Women's University and working for a publishing company, Yoko Shido has been engaged in the International Longevity Center since 1991. Her responsibilities included PR for education and organizing international exchange projects. She has been holding her current position since 2000.

International Longevity Center

American gerontologist, Dr. Robert Butler, established the center both in Japan and the U.S. in 1990. The center currently includes 14 countries and they conduct international surveys and research as well as educate people about aging.