

Davos special

Adaptation vital in changing world

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Kiyoshi Kurokawa, a professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies and former chairman of the National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission, says the world is currently experiencing the most dramatic shift since the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries.

"People need to realize that a major paradigm shift is occurring with rapidly advancing digital technologies, and common sense and principles, which have dictated us for a long time, are no longer valid," Dr. Kurokawa, former president of the Science Council of Japan, said in a recent interview.

Deepening income inequality and intensifying nationalism are among the top 10 items on the global agenda that world leaders will be preoccupied with in 2015, according to a projection based on a survey by the World Economic Forum. In tackling these global issues, Kurokawa argues that the world leaders who gather at Davos in Switzerland for WEF's annual meeting must keep in mind that this dramatic paradigm shift is taking place now.

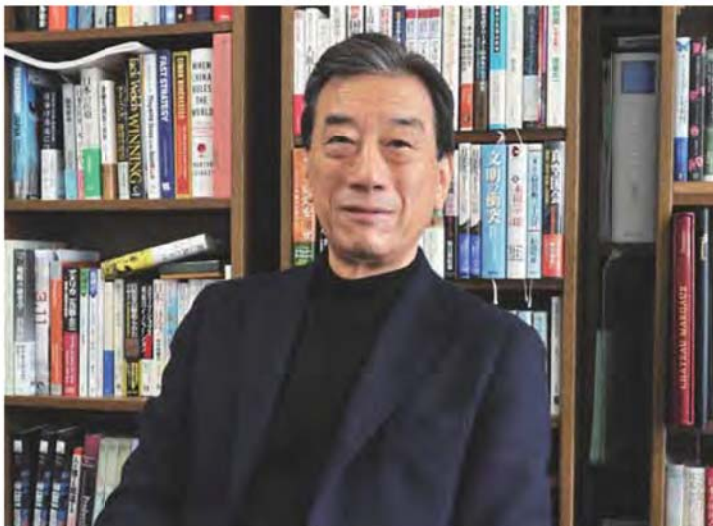
This year, the annual conference will kick off on Jan. 21 with over 2,500 participants from more than 140 countries representing business, government, international organizations, academia and the media.

"It's not easy to find solutions to various global challenges, but it's important to discuss those issues with world leaders who are aware of this major paradigm shift," said Kurokawa, who himself has participated in most of the Davos meetings this century, adding that Davos has been providing a unique opportunity for positive discussions on the world's pressing issues.

"It's different from the United Nations, for example. Politicians can talk more freely with business executives," he said, recalling the time when Shimon Peres, former Israeli foreign minister and president, joined the late Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian National Authority, for a public discussion at Davos.

Kurokawa pointed out that more and more people in the world are now connected via the Internet and the consequences seem to be huge.

"Even in small rural villages in develop-



Kiyoshi Kurokawa, a professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, talks to The Japan Times in his office in Tokyo on Dec. 30. YOSHIKI MIURA

ing countries, at least one or two may have or have access to mobile or smart phones and people can see and learn what is happening in the rest of the world," he said.

"The Internet is a contemporary 'incunabula,' enabling more people to see things, think and act," Kurokawa said, referring to the invention of printing technology by German Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century.

The invention of printing technology is believed to have eventually led to the religious revolution, the Renaissance, the rediscovery of modern science and, eventually, the Industrial Revolution. When people have access to information, they begin to question what they have been taught in churches and schools, he added.

The modern incunabula is fueling disenfranchised people who are far-removed from the elite and triggering movements like the Arab Spring and the Islamic State, he said. "The world has increasingly become uncertain," he said.

Kurokawa also pointed out that in such a rapidly changing world, strengths could become weaknesses and one has to recognize one's own weaknesses.

In Japan's case, what were once recog-

nized as Japan's strengths such as lifetime employment, seniority-based promotions in the same organization and the Japanese mindset of not questioning decisions by authorities have more often become weaknesses over the last two decades, according to Kurokawa.

"Japanese people may like playing baseball, but the world is becoming like playing soccer, where everyone has to think of the next play while in constant motion," he said. "But baseball players don't move until the pitcher throws the ball."

"In such a rapidly changing world, Japanese people cannot move forward and adapt to the new environment," said the former chairman of the nuclear accident investigation panel, who famously branded the reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in March 2011 as "a disaster made in Japan."

Japanese are adept at making things lighter and smaller if there are models to copy from, but they are not good at creating values in intangible things, such as systems. On the contrary, others like the British are better at creating values in invisible concepts such as science, finance and democracy, he said.

"We must know our weaknesses and be

humble in learning, collaborating and partnering with others," he said.

Kurokawa said that the recent emergence of more Japanese business representatives, including Suntory Ltd. President Takeshi Ninami and Lixil Group Corp. President and CEO Yoshiaki Fujimori, at Davos have been providing some signs of change. Still, he feels more Japanese leaders should be further engaged in such international dialogues amid surging Asian countries and the rest of the growing economies in the world.

To have more Japanese actively participating on the global stage, it's extremely important for Japanese people to spend some time abroad as individuals before they start working and assume a corporate or organizational identity, he said.

"If you live abroad at a young age, you will cultivate a healthy sense of patriotism toward your home country, because while staying abroad you will be asked a lot of questions about Japan and look at Japan from a broader framework," he said.

Kurokawa, who wears many hats, is also a member of The World Dementia Council, which was launched at the Group of Eight Summit in London in 2013.

He said dementia is a major health challenge in developed and developing economies, and digital technologies, including big data, will play a major role in coping with this challenge.

"Care of the aged (and dementia) is quite labor intensive and I think it will be robots who will care for the elderly in the



Unveiled in June, 2014, "Pepper," a humanoid robot that can communicate with people and sense emotions, made its debut as a clerk at a SoftBank Corp. mobile phone store in July. SoftBank has further developed an application, which can help prevent dementia through conversations and ask questions to perform a simple diagnosis of symptoms. KYODO

future," he said, adding, "Who else?"

"Social robots will become smarter than humans in a few decades, and as caregivers and companions they can work for 24 hours," he said.

As more private companies such as SoftBank Corp., which produces robots such as Pepper, join the robot industry,

robots will become more affordable and intelligent, he said.

"Along with the support of the private sector, which is engaged in developing robot and advanced digital technology, Japan can be very good at this, helping and reducing the burden on human caregivers," he added.