

Japan Should Involve NGOs in its ODA Programs

By **HIRONAKA Wakako**

My political career began in 1986, when the Cold War was taking a new turn towards the end of West-East confrontation. In those days, Japan was enjoying spectacular economic growth. Yet, while the 21st century was often referred to as "Japan's century," trade friction with other countries mounted. Japan's huge amount of foreign aid to developing countries was criticized as being heavily weighted towards provision of large-scale infrastructure while disregarding the impoverished local people. The Japanese Government argued that Japan's foreign aid was based on the request of the recipient countries, but Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) was still viewed as being profit-oriented to Japanese companies or, in short, "self-serving" to their own good, as they single-handedly undertook contracts and froze out local companies.

When I visited Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and US Agency for International Development (USAID) to get first hand knowledge on foreign development assistance cases, I was surprised to know that in those two countries, NGOs played a major role in their foreign aid programs. On my visit to Manaus, a city on upper Amazon in Brazil, I asked the Japanese Consul General in Manaus how the Japanese diplomatic mission was coping with disasters like massive fires or floods and suggested that Japan should provide some form of support such as relief funds. At that time, there was no such assistance available, even though it was clear that local people needed immediate help. Soon after I returned home, I appealed at Upper House Foreign Affairs Committee the necessity of overseas small-scale aid. This marked the beginning of "Grass-root grant aid."

The aid volume started from 100 million yen, and then rose to 15 billion yen. Now it is hovering around 12 billion yen. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989. But the post-Cold War world was not peaceful and faced new challenges. The areas where government overseas aid has given priority, shifted to such issues as global environment as well as regional conflicts, terrorism, drugs and infectious diseases. The traditional "request base" model of Japanese government's oversea aid has transformed to "consultation

base”, taking into account of a country’s military expenses of recipient countries. At the same time, priority has been given to those countries which pay respect to democracy and human rights; emphasize education, human resources development and environment; and exercise good government free of corruption. However, as the Japanese economy went through a slowdown in the latter half of the 1990's, Japan's ODA had to be reduced.

“Peace building” in light of human security---taking a step further from “peace keeping”---has been emphasized, as well as countering infectious diseases, fostering women's rights and health, providing self-reliance supports. In addition, participation of NGOs has become indispensable, to many Japanese eyes, in providing efficient assistance. Just as the United States and EU increased the amount of international aid while ensuring the transparency of aid through participation of NGOs and NPOs, Japan needs to make qualitative improvement, more than quantitative increase, of its foreign aid. In this regard, grass root participation of both donor and recipient countries is indispensable. Taking such participatory approach to ODA, we can work closely together to provide efficient supports that directly go to those in need of assistance, while NGOs of donor countries can provide heart-to-heart assistance in collaboration with the recipient countries.

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