

International Cooperation Report from the Field



*The Japan International Cooperation Agency is the implementing organ of Japan's official development assistance. What is needed from Japan's international assistance efforts in today's world of accelerating globalization and changes in the international situation following the September 11 terrorist attacks? In an interview with Japan Echo, **Sachiko Ishikawa**, a JICA senior advisor active in the field in Japan's international cooperation efforts, talks about the current situation and challenges in international cooperation, drawing on her personal experiences.*

Focus on Human Resources Development

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the world has been calling on Japan to make a bigger contribution to the global fight against terrorism. This is different from what we have been asked to do in the past, and so it is a new field for Japan. Fighting terrorism is certainly important, but I think the place where Japan can contribute the most is in the development of human resources.

This is an area where Japan has built up a solid record over many years in a wide range of fields, and we have earned the confidence of the countries we have assisted. This is where Japan has a comparative advantage and can make a real contribution to the world.

Japan takes a long-term approach to this issue, moreover. JICA, for example, uses the method of assigning experts to projects to train counterparts in recipient countries. In many Western countries, human resources develop-

ment usually means having people from the recipient country study at a university in their country. There are few countries that take the same approach to human resources development as Japan. This might not make headlines, but I think it is an effective approach, and it has been praised by other donor countries as well.

One example is the work we have done to help develop the legal system in Cambodia. Specialists were dispatched who gained a full awareness and deepened their understanding of the conditions in that country, and they spent considerable time discussing various issues with their Cambodian counterparts, working together to prepare draft bills.

France, a former suzerain, on the other hand, has tended to simply create a draft in French and have it translated into Khmer. The Japanese approach may be more cumbersome and time-consuming, but it produces steady results. I think this is the most direct and conscientious way of transferring Japanese know-how to other countries.

Sachiko Ishikawa

New Japanese Initiatives

That said, there is no denying that Japan will need to launch new initiatives to deal with the changed global situation. Japan's assistance up to now has been basically on a bilateral basis. There was an aspect of war reparations with regard to assistance provided to Asian countries, and such assistance was meaningful and effective. As the global situation has changed, however, it is becoming more difficult to resolve problems through bilateral assistance alone.

One new initiative we have launched at JICA is what we call the Partnership Program. Once a recipient country exceeds per capita gross domestic product of \$5,000, it is considered to have graduated from recipient status. In this program, recipient countries that had been receiving Japanese aid are now helped to become donors in their own right. They can pass on to lesser developed countries the things that Japan once did for them. The strength of this program is that it creates new donors.

Three-Party Assistance

To redress the disparities in the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, we are working to advance three-party assistance involving recipient countries, ASEAN, and JICA. One concrete example is aid for Laos. Traditionally, aid has been bundled through the Initiative for ASEAN Integration for the region's lesser developed countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam), but there are economic disparities even between these CLMV countries, and limits to such blanket assistance have been felt.

The blueprint for aid to Laos

was worked out as an alternative to this approach. It is not intended only for Laos, moreover, but will also serve as a pilot project for other countries. If it works well in Laos, it can be applied to Myanmar or Cambodia.

This aid is provided in accordance with a plan developed by the recipient country, encouraging ownership of the aid process. This is a very important project for ASEAN, which is working toward economic, politico-security, and socio-cultural integration by 2015, to see how much the economic disparity between the countries can be reduced. ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan has been giving great attention to this project, and efforts are being made to handle greater workloads by enhancing efficiency.

This aid to Laos is at the development rather than the policy level, meaning that its focus is on the field. People are now working toward the goal of ASEAN integration, which could eventually lead to an East Asian community. Where bilateral assistance takes into account not just the needs of the recipient country but also a regional framework, a larger policy-level blueprint is needed. As someone who has spent a great deal of time in the field, I would welcome a closer alignment between the policy and development levels.

Major Peace-Building Role

In the area of peace-building, it is hard to determine to what extent we can go without becoming politically involved. The fact that Japan has a pacifist Constitution is significant. Peace-building on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, for example, is something that cannot easily be advanced by the United States or China. An in-

ternational relations scholar in Singapore has said that Mindanao will be a litmus test for Japan's peace-building initiatives. If we are successful, Japan will probably play a major role in peace-building in other regions of the world.

Recently, Japan organized a seminar in Malaysia to which all stakeholders in the previous peace process in Mindanao were invited. There have been no other occasions where all of the parties were represented since the peace process was officially renounced in October 2008.

Forging Friendships

What inspired me to become involved in the work of international assistance was participation in the Ship for Southeast Asian Youth Program, one of the international youth exchange projects of the Cabinet Office. I consider it the starting point for my present work. The friendships I made with people from other Asian countries while aboard the ship still serve as sources of support for me.

I was young and serious, and at times I got embroiled in arguments. When all is said and done, though, I feel that personal character and human nature are the most important considerations in the kind of work that I do. This feeling has been reinforced recently. International assistance may be viewed as a process of "giving something," and things have a way of coming back to you. It is said that "a kindness is never lost." If we narrowly pursue national interests and chase after short-term returns, the end result will not be of much benefit to our country.

After all, becoming friends in itself involves putting aside one's narrow, personal concerns for the sake of the other person. 