

The Non-Profit Sector And International Giving In Japan

The Work Of Project Hope Japan

By Kumiko Omura

[Editor's note: Kumiko Omura completed a minor in Asian Studies while studying at Mary Baldwin College in 2001-02. Her goal is a career with organizations that work for the benefit of people in developing countries, especially in Southeast Asia. She joined Project HOPE Japan in early 2003. She wrote this article to inform readers about international assistance programs in Japan.]

Japan has a long tradition of philanthropy and today there are many Japanese people and organizations doing critically important work helping less advantaged people throughout the world. My own work at Project HOPE Japan (PHJ) will soon take me to Cambodia, but before departing it might be interesting to look at PHJ and its activities.

Project HOPE Japan is one of several non-profit organizations supporting developing countries in the medical field. Although our base is in the United States, we have an independent budget and work with programs in mainly Asian countries. Our programs are not on the big scale of some American NGOs and international organizations, but I am sure that we do provide good services to native peoples who really need help.

NPO/NGOs¹ are growing rapidly in Japan now and are accruing some degree of power and influence. The Japanese government strongly supports home-grown NPO/NGOs and gives many of them substantial grants and appropriations to carry on their operations both at home and abroad. Actually, Japan is famous for spending substantial sums of money for supporting the developing countries. However, unfortunately, our government has

¹ Non-Profit Organizations / Non-Government Organizations

not been good at supporting native peoples who really need help. What I mean is that the government focuses on infrastructure not on local services for the people (it is difficult for the government to take care of such services). On the other hand, NGOs can't run big projects because of limited budgets, but they can run small but good programs with native peoples. For these reasons, the government (to be specific, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, MOFA) is very active in offering grants to NGOs.

It is still hard for Japanese NGOs to collect money. Basically, Japanese are very serious about spending their own money on themselves and there is no long tradition of personal philanthropy. Thus, it is sometimes difficult for charities to rely just on personal donations. When living at Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, I found that many individuals made donations to churches, foundations and the like if they approve of the organization's goals. However, we don't have a long history of personal philanthropy, so people don't loosen their purse strings even for non-profit organizations. I think that this fact is one of the reasons Japanese NGOs are still small compared with western NGOs. However we don't surrender to this fact!! We visit many Japanese corporations and encourage them to make international contributions. As a result, about 300 corporations have become our members and support our programs. Moreover, we do our best running good programs. We believe this is the best way to get support and donations from people, corporations and the government.

PHJ was founded in 1997. At that time all staff members were retired people because NPO/NGO work was not considered was not regarded as a real job. Most Japanese even today still believe that the staffs of those organizations are unpaid workers even today. The staff then didn't have enough knowledge about NPO/NGOs, but they really used their business skills for social/international contributions. They worked very hard for the organization and gave it a strong foundation. As a result, we have two local offices, get three grants from MOFA and our annual budget today is about one and half million dollars.

In addition to that, PHJ first got the certificate of Authorized NPO in Japan because of its good management.

I would like to introduce you to some of our programs. In Thailand we have four programs; AIDS/HIV prevention and Cervical Cancer Prevention are two of them. Even though we have run the AIDS/HIV program for four years, it has not been an easy experience because most people in Thailand are Buddhists. People there hesitate to talk about sexual things and didn't try to join our workshop. But, we continued to open workshops and worked with peer leaders, who learned about how to protect themselves from AIDS/HIV and who volunteered to share their knowledge in those workshops. As a result, the number of people attending these workshops is certainly increasing and they are learning a lot more about AIDS/HIV. Cervical Cancer is one of the serious cancers in Thailand, but most Thai women don't know how scary it is. Collaborating with Siriraji Hospital and the National Cancer Center, we visit many places by car equipped with medical machine and encourage people to check their uterus-cervix. Moreover, our collaborators, Japanese doctors of Kitasato University School of Medicine, visit Thailand and have a center to teach advanced-techniques.

We have two programs in Indonesia. One of them is medical follow-up. The other is Oral hygiene education. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which is actually affiliated organization of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, run major projects, for example, donating big medical equipment and building hospitals. However, JICA is weak at following up on its projects. When we started medical follow-up, Indonesian hospitals couldn't use some good medial equipment JICA donated because they didn't know how to fix them after having troubles with the equipment. We send a technician to repair the equipment and teach native people how to fix it. If people can't handle equipment by themselves, it's useless even if we donate good things. Sustainable support and activity is really important in our work in developing countries.

We have found that oral hygiene is not a major concern in Indonesia. Many Indonesians simply don't fix their teeth even if they have a cavity. People didn't have a habit to fix their teeth even they had cavity in Indonesia. Some Indonesians believed that they would have bad luck if they repaired their teeth! In order to improve the situation, we started having workshops in schools in cooperation with local dentists. In those workshops we teach children and parents proper methods of brushing their teeth and we checked their teeth and kept their dental records. It took time to get our message across, but in areas where we have worked we see substantial progress certainly in terms of the number of people who are visiting dentists. From this program, we have learned that we need patience to have programs in foreign countries.

We are also doing a lot of work in Cambodia which now ranks third in our organization's level of support. We have a plan to start a Maternal and Child Health program. I am a member of this program and plan to go to Cambodia for collecting data in the early fall of 2003. In Cambodia most women give birth to children with the support of a traditional birth attendant (TBA) at home. However, the delivery condition and environment is worse and the country's infant mortality is pretty high compared with those in developed countries because most TBAs have never been educated in a medical school . We hope that we encourage people to be more interested in their health issues and that our program improves especially maternal and child health through supporting TBAs.

NPO/NGOs have grown rapidly in Japan in recent years and are worthy of note. They are good for older, often retired people to offer their skills and they are great for younger people who want some satisfaction that their work is actually helping others in need. On the other hand, it's hard to say that NPO/NGO provide a good working environment for staff. Because most NPO/NGOs can't provide enough benefits for staff and salaries are so much lower than in the commercial sector. In order to overcome NPO/NGOs' weak points and

gain much more understanding from people, we would like to run good as many programs as we can for us and for people who really need help.