

Partnerships between ODA and NGOs: for more effective international co-operation (6)

Final part : For better ODANGO; Who are we helping, after all?

Very often those working in the field of international co-operation for development (for example JICA experts and JOCV volunteers) when reflecting upon their experiences in the field, say that they were there on a mission of technical assistance and supposed to be teaching or conveying something to the people of the beneficiary country, but in reality they learned more than they taught. As this kind of sentiment shows very clearly, development aid or international co-operation is not a one-way street only involving input from developed to developing countries. In the case of rural development, so-called rural villages certainly have a great number of problems. It is true that they need some support from the outside in order to tackle said problems. However, the problems can hardly be solved by imposing foreign ways of thinking and foreign methods imported from developed donor countries.

For example, take the farming system. Over the years, many rural villages learned to use the natural resources available to them in their particular area, and have developed their own natural systems of agriculture such as "complex farming" and "resource-circulation farming." The farming system in Laos as reported in AAINews Vol.22 is one such example. However, as a result of "modern" rural development activities initiated by developed countries, more productive species and popular commercial crops were introduced to increase the agricultural productivity and income for farmers. At the same time new fertilizer, pesticides and machines started to be used. In many cases this has led to the collapse of local resource-circulation systems, and has resulted in heavy debts for farmers who have bought modern farming materials and expensive farming machines.

So as not to repeat such failures, and in order to aim at community-based sustainable development, today it is seen as increasingly important to work in a very close relationship with local communities. In this context, the role of NGOs nowadays has been re-evaluated and is now seen as crucial. However, NGOs alone cannot solve all the problems, and thus the collaboration between ODA and NGOs is a very important theme in the field of development aid today. In pursuing this, however, ODA workers should not employ NGOs simply as useful instruments, but instead establish a genuine collaborative relationship with NGOs, in which they can freely exchange their opinions, learn from each other and grow together. In addition, it would be problematic to see this partnership with NGOs only in terms of the efficiency of aid work, as if the idea of efficiency derives only from the convenient wishful thinking of the donor.

Lastly, it should be noted that NGOs, and certainly not ODA, aren't the main actors in development aid activities. The local communities as beneficiaries should realize that they are the main players, and only when they start thinking of their own way of development and start acting according to their ideas, can real changes take place. We should never forget the very basic fact that the role of both ODA and NGOs is that of catalyst, to provide stand-by support for the local communities' own development activities. What we sometimes feel, seeing NGOs from other developed countries is that they are more like business, or profit-seeking companies rather than good-willed volunteer organizations as are the case with most Japanese NGOs. Those overseas NGOs have talented staff who joined because working for such NGOs is better-paid compared to working for government agencies or private companies. Furthermore the work is more rewarding. However, it is also a fact that such organizations have become rigid in order to ensure their own survival which is possible only by carrying out development projects of their own. It also cannot be denied that in a way, their international development co-operation is also a means of fund-raising for themselves. What is and should be the ultimate goal for those engaged in development aid? For how long should we go on with our aid activities? Needless to say, aid activities should serve the interests of local communities, and yet, at the same time, development aid workers should always keep in mind that eventually they have to let local people stand on their own feet, for their own good.



Small-scale water weir built by a traditional method



Large-scale dam and power generation facility built by modern engineering work