

Grassroots Collaboration, AAI's approach

Part 6 The Goals of Grassroots Cooperation

In the current series so far we have reported on some cases of so-called “grassroots cooperation” undertaken by AAI as its original activity (Muscat Fund activity), in order to consider the meaning, challenges and the future direction of grassroots cooperation. These cases can be summarized as follows:

Type of Cooperation	Activity Summary	Key Words
Collaboration with local NGOs (Zimbabwe)	Various projects for rural community support in collaboration with local community-based organizations (NGOs)	- Community-based organization - Ownership of local people
Collaboration between experts and Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) (Syria)	Interaction and collaboration between experts and JOVC volunteers with different expertise and affiliations	- Strategic use of JOCV volunteers - Face-to-face assistance
Interaction with local community organizations (Oman)	Support for introduction of beekeeping techniques and small-scale greening projects through interaction with local women's groups and organizations for the physically disabled	- Environmental conservation activities by local people - Mutual support by local cooperatives
Preliminary study for agricultural rural development (Laos)	Preliminary study of the potentials of agricultural rural development in Laos to serve the local communities in a true sense	- Unhurried interaction - Team-building and understanding of the real needs - Activities initiated and conducted by the local people themselves

The important points which are common in these activities are that they stress the importance of locally based work and “ownership” of these activities by the local community (the local community's initiative), and that these activities are started from the point of understanding the real needs. For so-called participatory projects carried out in developing countries, the consent and active (as opposed to passive) participation of local people is one of the key factors which determines the success and failure of the projects. However, in reality there are often such cases where local people are passively mobilized under the name of participatory development. In other words, the top-down approach under the guise of bottom-up is prevalent.

Incidentally, one of the recent trends of grassroots cooperation (or participatory development) is the prioritization of poverty alleviation as a main goal. As a popular solution for this goal, income generating activities and use of micro-credit is encouraged. True, there is the reality of acute poverty in developing countries, and that is a big problem which should not be overlooked. However, is it the right way to proceed to resort to the approach based on the market economy system, in which everybody has to compete with each other to gain more and more “wealth”? Does that really lead to the reduction of poverty and improvement of livelihood of the poor as a whole? Doesn't that actually lead to the creation and widening of the gap between the rich and the poor? Also, is there a good enough remedy for the “losers” who are bound to be created in the “competition” promoted by the developers, and do they ensure some form of “safety net” measures in case the “investment” in the micro credit scheme fails?

Considering the potential danger of such a market economy approach, it seems necessary to rethink the role and meaning of traditional locally based systems of mutual support, such as “yui” and “kou” practiced in Japan in the past. Introduction of a modern version of such traditional systems, for instance local currency, may be considered, along with other forms of participatory and grassroots cooperation to build up local mutual support systems. “From competition to co-existence” should be the key concept when we think of the goal of participatory development and grassroots cooperation (i.e. when we try to answer the question “What is participatory development for?”).