

Pacific Island Nations Endangered by Climate Change

How Can Japan Contribute to Saving Them?

By Kazuyoshi OGAWA



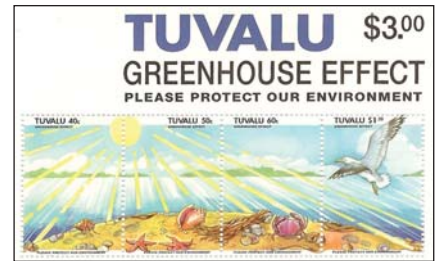
Pacific island countries, endangered by climate change, pin their hopes on Japan's contribution.

How to address the problems posed by climate change is a task of pressing urgency that faces the international community. Technology-oriented Japan has been promoting the development of various energy-saving technologies. People living in developed countries, including Japan, need to review their lifestyle and work harder to reduce their carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. At the same time, developed countries have an all-important responsibility to help countries in a natural environment vulnerable to climate change devise necessary accommodative measures they can implement.

Pacific islands are confronted with manifold hardships stemming from climate change. The growing frequency of typhoons, droughts and heavy rainfalls

caused by climate change presents them with quite serious problems. In particular, island countries made up of coral reefs only several meters above sea level face the reality of losing their national land itself. Tuvalu, which comprises nine reef islands, has reported progressing shore erosion, loss of sand and inundation at times of high tides. For the country, the combat against warming is an issue that requires prompt action.

Tuvaluan Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia met Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda when he attended the Asia-Pacific Water Summit in Oita, western Japan, in 2007 and asked for Tokyo's assistance in his country's efforts to deal with those challenges. Fukuda pledged that Japan is ready to help Tuvalu as one of its Pacific friends.



A stamp warning against global warming is issued in Tuvalu.

High Remarks for Japanese Assistance

As one of the top aid donors for Oceania, Japan has assisted Pacific islands in various ways. Projects undertaken so far by Japan include those for infrastructure development aimed to shore up their economic base, assistance in the medical and educational fields aimed to enhance human security and development of human resources through acceptance of trainees and students, and dispatch of volunteers. As regards climate change, Japan has helped Fiji and other island nations establish a regional weather observation system designed to minimize damage caused by frequent typhoons. At present, the Japanese government is studying implementation of a regional program for disaster prevention.

Japan often takes a long time in implementing its economic assistance after receiving aid requests. Some recipient countries complain about the lack of mobility in Japanese aid. However, assistance offered by Japan has won high remarks for being fully backed by high technology and elaborate aftercare, and for its greater adaptability to the characteristics of recipient countries. One notable example is solar photovoltaic power generation, which is drawing growing attention as a renewable energy

source. In smaller island nations, waste from batteries can often pose a serious problem. However, a hybrid solar power generation system which the Japanese government put into operation in Tuvalu in February 2008 in cooperation with a private company has been designed not to discharge lead and other waste substances that could pollute the environment. According to the general manager of Tuvalu Electric Corporation, the system drew high interest from participants at a regional workshop held in Vanuatu in April 2008 after a report was made on its operation.

Problems Faced by Tuvalu

At Tuvalu's request for assistance, the Japanese government carried out a field survey in February and March 2008 with the aim of assisting in the country's combat against warming. A survey team sent by Japan has found that the environmental problems facing Tuvalu are related to both climate change and social factors. It has decided to consider measures to be taken while seeking to share the perception with the government of Tuvalu. The Japanese government has also acted in response to a request to send an advisor to help the local government on overall national development. This writer was sent to Tuvalu in April 2008 as a JICA expert in charge of assisting in the formulation and implementation of development policies, including those geared for addressing problems posed by climate change.



Scene of cargo discharge on a remote island of Tuvalu: Changes in the lifestyle are boosting oil consumption on an island without a port as well.

I visited Tuvalu after a break of 10 years. I found the islanders little changed in their unworldliness and warmth. At the same time, I saw the difficulties the government of Tuvalu is having in dealing with tangled problems at home and conducting hard negotiations with foreign governments with a limited number of human resources. If the sea level rises by 59 cm in the next 100 years, which is the upper forecast made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Tuvalu will face the danger of losing its entire land.

As I mentioned above, the country has its own social factors, notably an excessive concentration of population in its capital Funafuti. Some of the local people complain that they have begun to be hit by damage attributable to the rising sea level. Some others say Tuvalu has no future and that they are thinking of moving to other countries. It is in this situation that this writer has been engaged in talks with Prime Minister Ielemia and other Tuvaluan leaders and supporters from other parts of the world on how to realize the country's future image envisaged by its people, what action the local people can take themselves and what assistance the developed countries can offer to help their efforts.

Tuvalu Pins Hopes on Japanese Aid

Many of the Pacific island countries depend on thermal power generation. The soaring oil prices are putting enormous pressure on their national economy. Countries like Tuvalu and Kiribati that have no mountains and rivers must depend on rain water. Palau, another Pacific island country, has been hoping that as a future energy source and as a solution to water supply problems, an ocean thermal energy conversion power system and seawater desalination plants based on such a system will be commercialized at an early date with technical assistance from Japan. The Japanese government



The future of children in Southern island countries depends on efforts made by the present generation to address problems posed by climate change.

should be more forthcoming in the development of such renewable energy sources and environmental conservation technologies although these may not prove immediate benefit to the island countries. Important is how Japan and other developed countries can provide such technology to those island countries with different natural and social conditions in a most effective way. I think that Japanese are good at building such application technology.

The Pacific island countries are being tossed about not only by climate change but by other external factors such as globalization pressure and the surge of crude prices. These countries may have reasonably high levels of per-capita gross national income. But in many of those countries, much of that income is either remittance by migrant workers or financial aid from other countries. With their economic base fragile and human and financial resources insufficient, these countries are still in need of technical and financial aid from developed countries. They put great expectations on Japan which thinks and sweats with people of recipient countries while valuing their initiatives. JS

Editor's note:

The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's personal ones and do not represent those of the Japanese or Tuvaluan government or JICA.

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